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By GREGG CONRAD

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# The Editor's Notebook

## A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

**W**E HAVE before us a letter from one of our readers requesting that we either include reprints of famous stories that have appeared in our magazines of many years back, or follow the recent trend of other publishers in the field and issue a new magazine, contents of which would be devoted entirely to reprints.

**S**INCE THE subject of this letter is a matter that necessarily concerns all of our readers, we will make the reply in this editorial.

**T**HE QUESTION of reprints, and reprint magazines in the science-fantasy field is not a new one. It has cropped up from time to time, and in various ways has been exploited to a degree by others in the field. We have never done so.

**O**UR REASONS have been, and still are, manifold. Basically, we contend that reprints do more harm than good in furthering the field our magazines are well-deserved leaders in. Times change, and with them, styles and tastes. The stories that appeared in **AMAZING STORIES** some twenty years ago, while undoubtedly great works of fiction of the type, are by modern standards necessarily out-dated. We feel that our readers should receive the type of fiction that fits in with their current mode of living and entertainment. Stories that move fast, with new ideas, sharp, realistic dialogue. Stories keyed to the times.

**A**T BEST, the old "classics" are slow-moving, wordy, and by present knowledge and standards, their ideas are passe. Now, at the mid-century mark we've already gone beyond. Why then dwell on the past when there is so much more of current and future interest?

**T**HERE ARE other factors to be considered also. Certainly the writer can not be ignored in the discussion. Readers want the best fiction in the genre that writers can produce. But if their markets are limited (in most cases writers realize little, if any profit from their previous work) they must perforce seek other channels for their literary efforts. By this token the reader suffers. For the writer it is a question of pure economics. He has no market in reprint magazines, and therefore seeks elsewhere in other fields.

**A**ND WHAT of the magazines themselves? It has been proven, through experience, that few reprint publications last for any period of time. A year or possibly two is the average life of such a magazine. From the publishers' standpoint they are a sound proposition—as long as they sell. But in relation to their effect on the field as a whole they become by their very nature an unnecessary evil.

**S**O OUR policy is plain. We want to give our readers the best. The best is the new and timely. We feel that the expansion of science-fantasy warrants that contention..... WLH



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# The MENTAL ASSASSINS

*By Gregg Conrad*

**Of all the adventures he had faced in his day, none seemed so perilous as going into a man's dreams as a hired assassin!**

THE PLACE smelled of blood and the warm, suffocating odor of raw, living flesh even above the strong, disguising odor of disinfectant. The living corpse, for that was all it was in spite of the fact that it would still be living ten, twenty, perhaps fifty years hence, was a revolting caricature of a man, a fragment.

"That was Captain Walters. Sam Walters," the bug-eyed monster said politely. It was a doctor—bug-eyed because of the thick contact lenses, a monster because it could remain so calm and unaffected by the nearness of such an outrage against the senses. Otherwise it was Dr. Frank Bride-

well, considered one of the greatest surgeons of his time. "Sam Walters was the only *revivable* taken from a wreck of a B36 passenger liner ten years ago. You probably don't remember it."

"It so happens I do," Arnold Taschereau said.

He forced himself to look at the fragment of a body, wincing when the flaccid lips pulled apart with a sound like that of a foot being pulled from soft swamp mud.

The living body had no legs or hips, those essentials of normal life being replaced by glass and metal tubes that vanished into the side of a box. The







Even as his fist lashed out he wondered if this was just another part of a weird dream . . .

right arm and shoulder were gone, too. The stub of the left arm was held in a clamp, and was little more than skin over a bone fragment. The skin was an oily white. It would have been more in keeping with the underbelly of some foul thing in the stagnant waters of some hinterland bayou.

From the chest and neck other tubes emerged to go to the black box in straight lines like the neatly ordered wires inside a radio.

The eye sockets were empty tombs covered by lace edged curtains of skin. But even so, Arnold recognized the face of Captain Walters.

The forehead and the rest of the scalp were completely hidden within a close fitting, thick, cap-like affair that looked vaguely like a bulging stovepipe hat with its top pressed flat against the low ceiling.

Arnold studied this, then looked at Dr. Bridewell questioningly.

"That's the device that connects his mind with those of the others," the doctor said.

Looking into his lens-covered eyes, Arnold could see the curved reflection of the remains of Sam Walters in them. The doctor, mistaking the intent stare for admiration, smiled.

"It's one of the finest achievements of human engineering," he added. "Without it, Sam Walters would be just a blob of human flesh, kept alive because modern miracles of medicine and surgery made it possible, and rigid laws against mercy death would prevent his being allowed to die.

"With it—well, that's why you were called here in your professional capacity. With it, he lives in another world where his body is whole and strong. A world that has suddenly gone wrong though. That's why you were called. We hope you will consent to set it straight—if you can. We think you can—if it can be done at all—or we of course wouldn't have called you."

The doctor smiled as if he thought he had just paid a sincere compliment. Arnold Taschereau looked at the doctor doubtfully.

The smells, the entire room and everything in it, were beginning to sicken him.

"Do you mind if we go somewhere away from this to talk?" he asked.

"Of course. Of course," Dr. Bridewell said hastily. "I just thought—felt, rather—that it would be better for you to examine one of the physical units. I would have chosen another if I had thought—had any idea—that you could possibly have known Sam—Captain Walters—when he was alive—before he came here, I mean."

Arnold began to sense that underneath the doctor's calm exterior he was experiencing the same nausea. Maybe in spite of his appearance Dr. Bridewell had human thoughts and emotions.

**I**N THE hall, the doctor led the way back toward his office where Arnold had first met him, fifteen minutes before. They passed closed doors, spaced eight feet apart. The doors were paired on opposite sides of the hall, with a thick tube running straight across above each door and intersecting a long tube that ran down the middle of the hall.

"Behind each of these doors," Dr. Bridewell said calmly, "is a human unit. In the tubes overhead are the connecting circuits that make them all connected mentally. Each of these human units, is of course, what is left of some person who was practically decimated by some accident, so that there was no hope of salvaging it except in such a way that the brain would be kept alive. That is all they really are, actually: living brains with enough of a body left to provide a stable metabolism."

They had come to the door of the doctor's office. He opened it and stood

aside deferentially. Arnold entered and took the same chair he had occupied before.

"Now that you have seen one of the—units, Mr. Taschereau," the doctor said, his voice more positive, "we can go on with an explanation of what it's all about."

"Please do," Arnold murmured, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply to clear the evil fumes from his lungs.

"Altogether there are—were—yes, I think it would be proper to say are—twenty physical units in the bank," Dr. Bridewell began. "The reason it's confusing will come out shortly. That is, I suppose it would be all right to explain that now, but the explanation will be clearer if I tell you a few other things first."

Arnold looked at the bulging eyes through their thick contact lenses and turned away to hide his exasperation.

"In order to explain what I would like to explain," the doctor went on, "I'll have to compare it with a dream. That is the type of existence these—units—lead. A dream life in which they are physically whole. The only difference is that with these, the other people in their dreams are just as real as they are, and remember it."

He straightened up and leaned back in his chair.

"It's what might be called a common dream—a joint dream, to be more exact," he said. "At least, that is the way we understand it. We aren't too sure of everything that takes place. We believe the surroundings in that dream world are built up by a sort of democratic process among the several individual minds, varied in details by the individual desires or will of each of the units. What they all agree should be there is very much there. What only one or two things should be in the mass dream is set to one side geographically, where the others can't see it or don't

have to go unless they wish to."

"It begins to sound interesting," Arnold said. "A sort of democratic universe, so to speak. If the majority decide water is to be changed to wine, it is."

"Perhaps, in a manner of speaking," the doctor agreed doubtfully. "It would be more accurate to say that since the majority of the twenty units don't believe in miracles of that sort, their basic reality is pretty stable and very much similar to ours, so far as appearances are concerned."

"Fascinating," Arnold murmured. "I begin to see its possibilities. These human wrecks, made from normal human beings in the twinkling of an eye in some accident or other, unconscious, instants away from death except for the miracles of modern science, recover consciousness in this joint dream world they are joined onto by means of those hoods, and never know that their actual body is mutilated beyond all hope of redemption. They continue to be whole physically to themselves and their companions because they don't know they actually aren't. Right?"

"You have stated it better than I had hoped to," Dr. Bridewell said admiringly.

"I HAVE here a list of the names of the twenty," the doctor continued, lifting a paper off the desk surface and holding it close to his face to read it. "Yes this is it. I want you to study that list so you'll know those people. It would be perhaps better if you concentrated on three or four and got very well acquainted with them before—rather than try to get acquainted with them all. You will get along better that way; but it's essential that you know the twenty and know them by sight because—"

"Just a minute," Arnold interrupt-

ed. "You made a slip then that sounded very much like you were expecting me—but of course not. That would be too utterly fantastic. Pardon the interruption, doctor, and go on."

"But that's exactly what we want you to do," Dr. Bridewell said. "We want you to enter that dream world and become one of them—the twenty-first."

"That's insane!" Arnold said, half rising. "You don't mean that you're mad enough to cut me up—"

"No, no," Dr. Bridewell said hastily. "Nothing like that. It would just be temporary, and when your work is done you would be disconnected, of course, and return to the land of the real no worse for your experience."

He paused, smiling ruefully.

"I hadn't planned on broaching the subject of your entering that dream world until later," he went on. "I realize that at this stage it has come as quite a shock."

"Quite is right," Arnold agreed, thinking of those soulless, groaning lips on what had once been Sam Walters.

"Let me tell you something of what it will be like for you if you consent to help us," the doctor said. "You will be in an ordinary hospital room we've prepared for you. You will be given two capsules of the drug that makes you unconscious of things around you. When it has had time to take effect—about fifteen minutes—the cap will be put over your head. Almost at once you will find yourself somewhere in the dream world of those others, but so real will it seem that you will be convinced it actually is real. However, anything you say in your dream, you will say here too. We will have someone with you, listening. The antidote will always be ready. It will only take a second to remove the cap and administer the antidote."

"You make it sound a little better,"

Arnold said. "But just what am I being asked to enter their dream world for? I gather that something's wrong, but surely I don't have the qualifications or training to help them. I'm nothing but a rowdy adventurer who has managed to get a reputation. Because I was the first one to kill a Venusian Ank doesn't make me any braver than the dozens of men who have killed one since then. Because the Martian Canal Slurds singled me out to be their adopted pet doesn't mean I'm more appealing to a Slurd than any other human. Are you sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"We didn't pick on you because of those, ah, adventures that contributed to your fame," Dr. Bridewell said. He became silent. He seemed to be weighing something in his mind. "I may as well tell you," he went on slowly. "We needed a man with certain qualities, rather than abilities and qualifications. We asked certain government officials who they thought possessed those qualities of mind to the greatest degree. They recommended you to us."

"Oh, I see," Arnold said. "Go on."

"You see," Dr. Bridewell said. "A certain mental disease has taken root in this dream world. It is, actually, schizophrenia. There are twenty physical units. For a long time there were just twenty people in that dream world, each himself or herself, much as they were in real life before the accident that ruined their bodies. Now, suddenly, there are more than twenty people in that world."

"More? You mean that some of the minds have split to produce more than one individual?" Arnold asked.

"Yes," the doctor replied. "It's much more serious than it would be in a physically normal person. In a physically normal person the separate personality wouldn't find complete expression. It would have to compete with

the normal personality for residence in the body and control over it. Those restrictions aren't present in the minds of these twenty units. As soon as the split occurs, the new personality has a complete and entirely independent body of its own. It's—its even impossible to tell which of the original personalities split!"

"It seems to me that should be fairly simple to find out," Arnold said. "All you have to do is cut each unit out, one at a time, and if two people vanish when a certain unit is cut out of the whole, then that is the split personality."

"It isn't that simple," Dr. Bridewell said. "If we cut one of the units out of the circuit the mind of that person would immediately struggle up to conscious awareness of its real body. At all costs we must keep each of the twenty ignorant of his or her actual physical condition."

"Oh," Arnold said. "Then just what am I supposed to do?"

"We want you to, ah, kill those extra persons," the doctor said uncomfortably.

ARNOLD TASCHEREAU'S mouth dropped open. He stared unbelieving at the doctor. If the monstrous thing that had once been Sam Walters had outraged his senses, this calm though embarrassed statement he had made outraged the mind even more.

"There are only three," the doctor said, sensing Arnold's reaction. "I probably make it sound very cold-blooded, but I'm sure you will find they need killing. They are utterly—evil."

"I see," Arnold said, recovering a little of his composure. "I also see why I was chosen. It was my shooting of the poor fellow who went space wacky and took over the controls of the Martian Queen and was going to dive the ship sunward. You believe I have the

qualities necessary to enter this dream world and calmly shoot three strangers."

"You make it sound very bad," Dr. Bridewell said. "The way I—we, the other doctors and I—looked at it, we thought that in you we had found a man with the courage to save twenty lives in the only way we see possible. It takes courage to see that a man must die—and kill him."

"And how do you know these three can be killed?" Arnold took a different tack. "To kill a person you must destroy their physical body or damage it in such a way that the brain, the seat of consciousness, becomes inoperative. If I were to cut one of those dream bodies into little bits wouldn't it damage the physical seat of its existence?"

"That's possible, of course," Dr. Bridewell admitted. "We thought of that ourselves. We believe, however, that these three can be killed. They are, after all, the product of a split. And all the twenty-three dream persons are held rigidly by the common beliefs of the whole. For those three to be killed so the other twenty are convinced they are dead will build up a mass conviction against which the three will be helpless. We believe that they will then dissolve, as separate personalities, and return to their original state as frustrations and repressed desires in the minds of their owners. In other words, killing them, although it will seem like actual murder to you when you're in that dream world, will really be a sort of mental surgery on three sick minds."

The doctor smiled tiredly.

"Certainly," he added dryly. "In a mental hospital it isn't considered murder to effect a cure of a schizo patient and return him to society a normal person."

"You're right," Arnold chuckled. "I haven't heard of a person with a split

personality getting two votes in the national election."

A new thought occurred to Arnold.

"Just how," he asked, "are you able to know all that goes on in this dream world? You said I will talk, in my sleep, so to speak. Do some of these others still do that?"

"No," Dr. Bridewell said. "Periodically one of us tunes in on the dream world. We do it without taking the drug, and keep the attitude in our minds that we are separate from it and have no existence in it. You might say that we enter that dream world as disembodied spirits, relatively speaking. We become aware of it and can see what goes on, but if they are aware of us at all, it's in the same way, relatively, that a so-called psychic is supposed to be aware of the presence of a spirit being."

"This gets more and more interesting," Arnold said. "I've been on Mars and Venus. Now it looks like I have a chance to travel into a different kind of world than even they are. I don't know whether I could bring myself to do what you want me to do, but I think I would enjoy getting acquainted with that world and its twenty or twenty-three citizens. By the way, what do they think of it? They were in one world. Suddenly they saw almost certain death bearing down on them. They wake up in a different world and can't get back. It seems to me I myself would come to the conclusion I was dead and in heaven or hell under those circumstances."

The doctor shook his head.

"I don't believe you would," he said. "The mind refuses to accept death on such flimsy evidence. Remember, they still have their bodies, so far as they can discern. If the theory of being dead occurred to them, they denied it. They actually believe that some unknown force sent them into this dream world and that it actually

exists in the physical sense, in another dimension, or perhaps in another part of our own universe. One of their main occupations is trying to find out where they are and how to return to the Earth!"

Arnold whistled softly.

"I'd like you to take this list," the doctor said, handing Arnold the sheet of paper he had been holding. "Get thoroughly acquainted with these people. We've collected files on each. Photographs of what they look like. We even have voice recordings of some of them so you can learn the sound of their voices. Page after page of notes on their lives before they were in the accidents that nearly killed them. It will all help you when you're thrown among them and have to deal with them as living individuals." The doctor stood up and held out his hand. "I'll expect to see you tomorrow afternoon."

Arnold folded the sheet of paper and shook hands with the doctor.

"I'll be here," he promised.

**A**RNOLD TASCHEREAU left the hospital with the list of names and a heavy bundle of files under his arm, his thoughts seething with speculation.

Uppermost in his mind was the question, "Who were the twenty?" He knew one already. Captain Sam Walters. He had known Sam back in the days when he himself had been a time-clock puncher for Trans Global. That was ten years ago, before a doting aunt had died and left him enough money to do anything he wished for the rest of his life. Since that time he hadn't seen Sam. His passion for adventure had kept him on the go. But he remembered Sam well—and Sam would remember him. Who were the others?

There were other questions crowding in, also. Dr. Bridewell's pat assertion that the miracles of modern surgery had saved the lives of these hu-

man wrecks, and the law prevented their being subjected to euthenasia was all right—on the surface. It fell down when you asked, "Where were these human hulks before the perfection of that hellish takeoff on the encephalograph?"

The answer, of course, was that they were allowed to die. A man with his legs and hips torn off was allowed to die, before. But with the perfection of that dream circuit such a living wreck made an ideal subject for the grand experiment.

It was hellish, but it might be that it would prove to be a wonderful thing. It had its points. An accident victim, unconscious, maimed beyond repair, could be shoved into such a dream world and continue to live normally, so far as he was aware.

The doctors might be coldblooded and inhuman according to some standards, but Arnold understood them. If they got the kinks ironed out, such as schizo developments and how to get rid of them, it eventually might be that partial cripples might voluntarily choose to become parts of such dream banks, or even a much larger composite bank with thousands of individuals, all living normal lives until their shattered or disfigured bodies finally died.

No, Arnold concluded, he had no quarrel with the doctors. So he dismissed them from his mind. As he laid the files in the back seat of his car and climbed in, his thoughts switched back to the identity of the other nineteen members of the dream bank. Were they all chance accident cases? Who were they? Undoubtedly their identity wasn't known to the public. They had probably been listed as dead.

Arnold stepped on the gas, hurrying as fast as he dared, until he reached his hotel. In his room he spread the files out on his bed and started going into them.

HOURS LATER he sat back in the room's one large, upholstered chair, three photographs in his hands. Out of the nineteen strangers in that group of twenty people, sixteen were people who had nothing in particular to attract him to them. The three were different.

First, there was Pretty Boy Jones. He had been one of the Solar System's greatest fighters. He'd won the heavyweight championship in boxing and held it for two years, then resigned it to enter wrestling. In that game he'd beaten some of the greatest wrestlers known. He had been wrestling when the roof fell in on a huge auditorium. A beam had pinned him down, nearly cutting him in two. That was when he had been taken to the hospital and placed in the "dream bank". Six feet four, weighing two hundred and forty-five, twenty-six years old, blond, well liked. Ring wise and a good personality, but not too intelligent in things outside the ring, from the reports.

Second, there was Granger Tyron, the movie actor. He had been a great actor of the type first born in Robert Mitchum back in the early days of pictures before space travel. At the height of his acting career he had been in a car accident that broke nearly every bone in his body and tore his body almost in two.

Granger's movie career had been phenomenal. Working in Hollywood as a landscape gardener's helper, he had been discovered by a director. In his first picture he had hit the public right between the eyes. Arnold recalled many of his pictures. "The Martian Plainsman", "Killer on the Spacelark", "The Outpost", and others.

Arnold laid those two aside. One picture was left in his hand. It was that of a young lady he had never seen nor heard of before. Her hair in the picture was a deep, lustrous brown.

Her eyes were large and a clear blue. The files gave the information that her name was Mona West, and that she had written a best seller novel a year before her accident that had made her a fitting subject for the dream bank. Five feet six, twenty-three years of age, there was nothing spectacular about her life other than her having written a successful novel called "The Green Pastures of Space".

Yet there was something about her that had drawn Arnold to her the moment his eyes came to rest on her face smiling at him from the picture. If he had seen her in life he knew in his inner thoughts that he would have stopped her and made her acquaintance or killed himself trying.

Four people stood out among the twenty. Captain Sam Walters, the airplane pilot he had known personally; Pretty Boy Jones, the great fighter, whom he had seen in the ring many times; Granger Tyron, the great actor; and last, Mona West.

Until he saw her picture he still held doubts as to whether he would consent to enter the combined dream of the twenty people.

But now—he laid her picture on the coffee table where he could see it and stood up, looking down at it. His lips compressed in decision. He would enter that dream of people for whom there was nothing left but a dream—and straighten it out for them.

**"REMEMBER,** Mr. Taschereau,"

Dr. Bridewell said solemnly, "if, at any time, you want to escape from the dream, say so in a clear voice, willing us to hear. That will cause you to speak aloud physically. There will always be someone here to hear you, every minute of the day or night. We'll bring you out of it as quickly as it's possible."

"And never forget," one of the nurses said. "That it's nothing but a

dream. The joint dream of twenty normal people and three others."

Arnold lay back on the special cot devised for the experiment and relaxed. He was dressed only in a hospital gown, sox, and slippers.

The internes strapped him down firmly but comfortably. A nurse pushed up the sleeve of his left arm and cleaned an area of skin with cotton and alcohol.

He watched while Dr. Bridewell stabbed a hypo needle deep into the flesh and slowly pushed down on the plunger, driving the pale yellow fluid down.

"Close your eyes," the doctor said.

Arnold looked around at the ring of faces hovering over him. They were beginning to seem unreal, far away. He sighed and closed his eyes, blotting their faces from view.

A humming sound became audible. Would that be the top hat affair over his head? No, that hadn't been put on yet. The humming was growing louder. There was a feeling of movement. It became a rapid, slipping glide. But that was wrong. It was only the internes moving his cot over to where they could make it telescope into a sort of chair.

"Just a dream," Arnold said drowsily. "No matter how real, just a—dreeee...."

The humming became a roar. It would die down, then come back. It was almost like the roar of a gale. And it was cold.

Something soft and wet was landing against Arnold's face. It would land and cling, then trickle down. He wondered if the nurse was washing his face. Still, it was too cold for that. More like snow.

He opened his eyes. It was snow. Large, wet flakes. A gust of wind picked up a lot of it and blew it against him. He stumbled and slipped to one hand and his knees. It was



only four or five inches of snow, but the way it was coming down it would be a foot deep in another hour.

He climbed to his feet again and struggled on, the wind blowing against him. The roaring came from dimly seen trees around him. The snow was so thick that it was impossible to see very far.

It was getting colder. Arnold wished he had something warmer than the hospital robe on, then felt foolish, because he knew he had on a heavy coat, and was wearing heavy boots over his shoes.

What had made him think he was wearing a hospital robe? Crazy. It was dangerous to get crazy thoughts when you were out alone like this. That's why none of the others had wanted to come with him.

You didn't die, of course. No one ever died. But you could freeze, and then you might lay there forever, unable to move, going slowly insane with your own thoughts.

Of course, there was a way to escape. What was it? He stumbled slowly through the snow trying to remember. The wind was piling up drifts that were hard to push through. If he could only remember. But even if he did, where would he escape to? There wasn't any place but *there*. That's where he was headed. He'd just have to keep on.

**B**UT WHAT if he was wandering around in circles? The snow obliterated his tracks almost as soon as he made them. He could be wandering around in a small circle without going anywhere. And the snow was getting hard to push through. It wouldn't stay soft enough. It was getting soggy and sticky like slush.

The wind was a freezing blast now. It was forming a crust on the snow. That was unusual, to say the least.

Suppose it froze while he was standing knee deep in a drift. He would be held solid and never get away.

Unless he could remember what to do.

What good would that do? It would only take him back where he had been, wherever that was. He'd have it all to do over again. There must be some other way.

Arnold became aware that he had stopped walking for a minute. He tried to take a step. He was frozen fast—just as he had feared he would be. That was crazy, thinking he had frozen fast just because he had feared he might be.

There was nothing that could be done unless he could remember something he was supposed to know. He could pray. That was crazy too. To pray. But nobody was around to hear. He could pray and nobody would know.

"I'm stuck fast in the ice," he said out loud. As he said it he wondered why it was so important to speak slowly and distinctly when praying. "Take me out of this," he added, feeling foolish.

He waited. Nothing happened. He knew nothing would happen. It was silly to expect it. It was better than just doing nothing though.

The cold was creeping through his clothing. His legs were numb. Maybe he could die after all from freezing. Of course! What had ever made him think he couldn't die? It was a trap. If he hadn't thought he couldn't die he would have struggled harder. It was too late for that. He was stuck in the snowdrift.

The numbness was spreading all through his body. It was even affecting his eyes. The snow was wavering strangely. He closed his eyes tight to blot out the scene.

**H**E FELT warmer. That was a symptom of freezing, to feel warm. When the circulation stopped you felt warm where it stopped.

He opened his eyes.

"What happened?" Dr. Bridewell said, concern showing on his features.

Arnold blinked into the thick contact lenses of the doctor's eyes and saw the distorted reflection of the bloated high hat over his head. Full recollection came to him.

"They gave me a cold reception," he said dryly. He went on to describe what had happened.

"That's bad," Dr. Bridewell said. "We should have told you something about what you would find over there. We knew, of course, about the snow. They're all inside a dome. I don't know how they conjured it up, but its psychological basis is clear. It makes their world simple, with clearly marked boundaries. Outside the dome is nothing but eternal snowstorm."

"Why couldn't I have waked up inside the dome then?" Arnold asked, "I certainly expected to wake up with people around me!"

"It's possible that the three you're after sensed your presence and what you intend to do, and tried to prevent it by making you 'arrive' out in the snow," Dr. Bridewell said slowly. "If that's so, then it's going to be hard for you to break through into the dream. More than likely you will wake up right where you were, stuck in the snow, if you go back now."

"Why couldn't I remember anything about here?" Arnold asked. "I can remember everything in the dream vividly, but while I was dreaming it I couldn't even remember I was supposed to speak out loud to get out. I had a silly impulse to pray. I felt I had to pray out loud."

"That was your subconscious memory telling you what to do," Dr.

Bridewell explained. "Most people don't realize they're dreaming while they're dreaming. It's rare to know that it's a dream."

"I understand that," Arnold said. "But in it I had been somewhere. It seemed like I belonged in that world, and had been in the dome. You had never told me about the dome, but in the dream I knew about it."

"Part of that was the telepathy of the mass dream," Dr. Bridewell explained. "Part of it was your own unconscious attempt to rationalize. In your mind you knew that you had existed a long time. Therefore you denied that you had just materialized in the snowstorm by feeling that you had been someplace and was trying to get back."

"I'm beginning to think I won't like it," Arnold said. "I had sort of understood that I would go into this with my full senses about me. I was telling myself that I would have to be very careful not to let the others know it was just a dream they were living. Now I'm beginning to think when I go back, if I do, I won't be able to remember myself that it's only a dream!"

**D**R. BRIDEWELL looked keenly at Arnold. He hesitated before speaking.

"Perhaps you'd better wait before going back," he said. "We can try it again tomorrow—if you still would like to try. In fact, a night of normal sleep might help you regain your confidence and think of ways to get around the snowstorm."

"I think I would like to think it over some more," Arnold said. "These straps make me feel hemmed in."

Dr. Bridewell hastily freed Arnold and stood back while Arnold stood up and took a few steps around the room. The nurse walked beside him

ready to catch him if he stumbled.

"Come back tomorrow," Dr. Bridewell said tonelessly.

"Sure," Arnold said. "Where's my clothes?"

The nurse left the room and returned at once with his clothes.

"I'll call the hospital garage to bring your car to the front entrance," Dr. Bridewell said. He turned and left the room. The nurse followed him.

Frowning at the floor, Arnold dressed hastily. He left the hospital gown on the cot where it was telescoped up like an upholstered chair.

A feeling of anger was growing in him. Anger against the doctor for some unaccountable reason. Anger against the three schizoid beings in that dream for getting him stuck by such a simple device as a snowbank. But mostly anger against himself, because he felt he was letting someone down, whether the doctor or those twenty in the dream.

With his hand on the knob, ready to open the door, he suddenly realized he had no intention of returning. He'd had enough.

Out in the hall he looked about uneasily for the doctor or the nurse. No one was in sight. He went down the hall past the doors that were close together, with the straight tubes up near the ceiling that contained the wires that hooked up the minds of the twenty hopeless cripples so they could lead a normal life in a dream world of their joint creation.

He walked past those doors quickly, feeling like a deserter. He paused at Dr. Bridewell's office door, then hurried on. If he faced the doctor he would give away the fact that this was goodbye. He'd drop the hospital a line from the hotel, then take the next spaceship to Mars or Venus and forget about it all.

Outside he tripped down the stone

steps. His car was waiting at the entrance, its motor running. He climbed in and drove down the driveway to the highway.

AT THE HOTEL he went straight to his room. There he sat down and wrote his letter to Dr. Bridewell. After he had finished it he remembered the files. They were laying on the table. He added a postscript saying he was returning them by messenger.

He read the letter over, sealed it in a hotel envelope, and called downstairs for a messenger. He paced the room smoking a cigarette until the messenger boy arrived. He gave him the file envelopes and the letter and paid him.

After the messenger boy had gone he felt better. It was over. Definitely over. He could forget about the whole experience now.

"Oh yes," he muttered. "Got to get a reservation on the plane to New Mexico to the spaceport." He phoned and found he could catch the nine o'clock plane in the morning.

"That leaves an evening to kill," he muttered, hanging up. He looked at his watch. It was almost six o'clock. "Might as well have something to eat," he added.

He frowned at himself in the mirror while he ran the electric shaver lightly over his face. He didn't bother to change his clothes.

Down in the lobby he hesitated between the cocktail lounge and the dining room. He decided to have a Martini before eating.

The cocktail lounge was nearly empty. There was a party of six at one table. Half a dozen men distributed along the bar. A man was at the electric organ. The sign beside the organ said his name was Albert Rossini. The music was soothing.

Arnold sat behind a three-cornered table in one corner. After a while the

girl took his order. When she came back with his Martini, the way the subdued light struck her, she reminded him of someone.

After she left he sipped at his Martini trying to remember who she reminded him of. It came to him. She looked like the picture of one of those girls in that dreamworld. He finished his Martini in a gulp and set the glass on the table with a thump.

The girl looked his way at the sound. He nodded. She brought him another Martini.

"Pretty early in the evening to drink them that fast," she said, smiling.

"You gave me an idea," Arnold said.

"What idea?" the girl asked.

"Not what you think," Arnold said. "To spend the evening drinking." He paid for the drink and gave the girl a dollar tip. She eyed the tip thoughtfully.

"I wasn't thinking what you thought I was thinking," she said. "But you gave me an idea too."

"What idea?" Arnold asked, running the tip of a finger around the lip of the glass.

He was clumsy. He tipped the glass over. The drink spilled in his lap.

"Oh!" the girl said. She ran and brought a towel. "What's your room number?" she asked while he mopped at his clothing. When he looked up at her she added, "I'll send a boy up to bring you down some clothes. You can change in the men's room, and he'll take this suit to the valet shop."

"Oh," Arnold grunted.

"You have the wrong idea about me," the girl said. "I get off at seven. I'm afraid I'll have to let you take me out just to prove to you I'm not that kind of a girl."

"My room's seventeen fifty-three," Arnold said. "I'll have another Marti-

ni while I'm waiting."

The girl went out into the lobby. She came back and brought him a Martini.

"On me," she said when he tried to pay for it. He frowned at her as she walked away.

"Which one of those girls in the dream does she remind me of?" he wondered. The question made him think. He hadn't asked her her name.

The boy appeared through the lobby doors with his clothes. He rose and followed the boy to the men's room and changed his clothes. He gave the boy a dollar tip and went back to his table.

"What's your name?" he asked the girl when she came with another Martini.

"Mary Rutherford," she said. She gave him a nervous smile.

"Mary Rutherford," he said reflectively. "Mona. That's it. Mona West. Ever hear of her?"

"No-o," Mary said. "Wasn't she the author of a book? I seem to remember reading that she was killed in an accident a couple of years ago. I may have read her book."

"That's her," Arnold answered. "My name's Arnold Taschereau."

"I'll see you at seven thirty," Mary said, turning away. She turned back. "In the lobby." Arnold smiled at her departing back. It was a nice back.

"SO YOU see," Arnold said bitterly. "I'm running out on the doc."

It was two in the morning. He and Mary were sitting at a corner table in the fifth or the tenth nightclub. It had taken seven more Martinis after she had joined him in the lobby before he started to unburden himself. It had taken Mary three of them to start believing what he said might be true. After the fourth she had started study-

ing Arnold seriously. Even pityingly.

Now she shoved back her fifth drink with determination in her movements.

"You know," she said. "I was starting to believe you for a while. But I can see it now. You're just another guy from Dubuque or Albany or Chicago who likes to pretend he is somebody when he's away from the wife. You must be a writer or something to have such an imagination. So you're the explorer, Arnold Taschereau! I've heard of him. The natural type to pretend to be. I doubt if he looks anything like you, though, Arnold—or whatever your name is."

"But it is my name," Arnold protested, bewildered by this line of attack.

"O.K.," Mary said with studied unbelief. "But why this line about exploring in a dream? Does your imagination always run that way when you get about three too many? Why couldn't you have just been content to tell me you are just back from a secret exploration trip to Saturn or someplace?"

"I don't blame you," Arnold said bitterly. "But I guess it's better to have you think I'm a liar than a coward."

"Maybe I think you're both," Mary said coldly. She felt the short hairs at the nape of her neck start to rise as she saw him change uniformly from being drunk to being cold sober in a space of half a minute. In that thirty seconds she realized beyond any doubt that Arnold had told nothing but the truth—could tell nothing but what he thought was the truth. But she forced herself not to let him know.

"Mary," he said. His tone was cool, determined. It hadn't been loud, yet people at other tables turned to look at him. "You've just talked yourself into something you can't talk yourself

out of. I'm taking you out to the hospital and make the doc show you those things that were once alive."

Mary picked up her untouched fifth Martini and pretended to sip it in order to conceal her expression until she could quiet her heart beat.

"That would only show me you aren't a liar," she said finally. "I think I'll go home. You stay here. You can find another girl. I know my way home."

She slipped away from his clutching hand and went toward the exit. In the mirror she saw him glare at her, then rise to follow. She frowned and hesitated when she saw the bouncer lay his hand on Arnold's shoulder. This was one of the few places where a girl could get rid of an unwelcome escort. The bouncers were obliging. They would stop the guy and argue with him until she could get away. But she didn't want that this time. She wanted Arnold to follow, catch up with her.

Outside there was a lone taxi waiting. She knew the driver by sight. She looked back at the club entrance. Arnold wasn't in sight. She stuck her head in the window of the cab.

"Drive around the block and come back," she said. "If I'm still alone go around again."

"You can't catch me said the little girl," the driver said, grinning. He slipped the clutch and drove away.

Mary stood at the curb and craned her neck to see if a taxi was coming. She was still doing that when Arnold came out of the club blowing on his knuckles. She pretended to be angry and surprised when he stopped beside her.

The cab swung around the corner and came toward them slowly, pulling toward the curb. When it stopped, Mary opened the door and got in, hastily closing the door after her. Ar-

nold opened it to climb in beside her.

"Will you please get out?" Mary said icily.

"No," Arnold said. "Driver, take us to the Briant Hospital."

"Driver," Mary said. "Will you please get rid of this man. I had the cab first."

The driver turned his head and looked at Arnold.

"Sorry, lady," he said. "I don't get paid for work like that. I can stop when I see a cop if you want."

"Please do," Mary said.

Arnold leaned forward, his arm over the driver's seat. A ten dollar bill slipped from his fingers.

"Briant Hospital," he said. "And forget about the cops."

**S**UDDENLY THE cab door opened. Arnold glanced up quickly to see who it was. It was the bouncer.

"You have a nice solid right," the bouncer said, sliding into the seat beside Arnold. As he said it he rubbed the jutting tip of his jaw tenderly.

"What are you doing here?" Arnold asked coldly. "Don't you have a job to hold down? Or did you just get off work?"

"Got fired," the bouncer said sadly. "And it's your fault. You shouldn't have hit me like that. You should have known it would get me fired."

"Sorry," Arnold said contritely. "I didn't think. But I couldn't figure why you were mixing in, and I was afraid Mary would get away."

The bouncer seemed to notice Mary for the first time.

"Hi, kid," he said.

"You know her?" Arnold asked. When the bouncer shrugged Arnold said. "What's your name?"

"You can call me Joe," the bouncer replied. "I'll answer to it. What's yours?"

"Arnold Taschereau," Arnold an-

swered in a casual manner.

Joe stuck out his hand. Arnold took it. They started to shake hands.

Joe's left only travelled ten inches. Joe winced in pain as Arnold's belt buckle bit into the backs of his fingers.

Arnold doubled up. He had been caught completely by surprise. The blow to the solar plexus paralyzed him, his breathing, his thoughts, his muscles.

He wasn't immediately aware of being dragged out of the cab. It surprised him to be on the sidewalk. He got to his hands and knees and rose unsteadily, gasping for breath.

Joe's fist landed on his forehead like a mallet. He staggered back and sat down. There was a fleeting glimpse of Mary's white face pressed to the window of the cab as it pulled away from the curb. Then Joe's big fist was gripping his shirt front, lifting him up.

Another blow would come in a second. With half glazed eyes he saw Joe's immense figure drift down past his eyes like a slow elevator. He waited until he was sure his fist would land right, and struck out with everything in him.

There was a grunt, half of surprise and half of pain. The fist let go of his shirt.

Arnold danced back out of range and went into an act of seeming half out on his feet. His thoughts were clearing. Strength was flowing back into his paralyzed arms and shoulders. If he could keep out of the bouncer's way another few seconds he would be all right again.

Joe watched him, rubbing the spot where Arnold had hit him.

"I think I'm going to like you, Arnold," he said. He came forward lightly on his feet, wary and suspicious of Arnold's apparent weakness.

His left shot out. In a split second Arnold decided it was a feint and would be followed by a lethal right. He ducked into the feinting fist and felt the right buzz past his ear as his own right sunk deeply into Joe's stomach.

**J**OE'S ARMS dropped momentarily. Arnold took advantage of it. He watched, fascinated, as his left, seemingly separate from him, rose in slow motion and connected with Joe's immobile chin.

For the second time in perhaps ten minutes the bouncer fell back, out before he lit.

Arnold looked around. The taxi with Mary was gone. He took out a cigarette and lit it with a shaking hand. There was nothing to do but wait for Joe to wake up. Joe had half admitted knowing Mary. He might know where she lived—and Arnold knew now that he could lick the heavier man any time he chose to. He sensed Joe's eyes on him from where he lay on the sidewalk.

"Sorry, Joe," he said, smiling mirthlessly.

Joe's hand went up to his chin. A finger touched it gently.

"That's quite all right, Arnold," Joe said politely. "I had to learn, I guess."

Arnold took out his pack and offered Joe a cigarette. Joe took it. He looked up at Arnold's face while Arnold held his lighter to the cigarette.

When Arnold stood back he rose slowly to his feet.

"Where does Mary live?" Arnold asked.

"How should I know?" Joe said. "I've seen her in the club a few times, of course; but that's all." He looked keenly at Arnold. "You want to get acquainted with her, don't you?" he said.

"It's your fault I didn't," Arnold

pointed out. "It sort of leaves it up to you to find her for me again doesn't it?"

"We have a mutual responsibility toward each other," Joe said, his careful, cultivated diction sounding out of place coming from his fighter's face. "You lost me my job, you know."

"Help me find Mary and I'll get you another job," Arnold promised. "And don't tell her, but I'm serious about her. I just met her this evening, but I don't want to lose her."

**"I** KNOW that taxi driver," Joe said. "We could wait until he gets back and ask him where he took her."

"That's our best bet," Arnold agreed. "Want a drink with me while we wait?"

"I don't drink," Joe said. "Anyway, it'd be better to wait out here. This is his stand, but sometimes somebody's waiting for him when he drives up. We might just miss him."

It was twenty minutes before the cab came back. When it came to a stop at the curb Joe bent down and stuck his head in the driver's window.

"My pal here, Arnold, would like to know where that girl went," he said. "As a favor to me, would you take him there?"

"Why not?" the driver grinned. "He gave me a ten spot."

"Fine," Joe said.

He opened the back door of the cab and climbed in. Arnold ducked down to follow him into the cab. Joe's foot planted itself against his neck. Suddenly he was flying backwards across the sidewalk.

He came to rest against the door of the nightclub. Before he could rise, the cab was speeding down the street, its tail lights winking as it braked for a sharp turn at the corner.

His eyes darted the other way. An-

other cab was coming. He jumped up and ran into the street to flag it down.

"Follow that cab that's going around the corner," he ordered, climbing in. In the cab he took out another ten dollar bill and shoved it in the driver's hand. "Get going."

He settled back, cursing his stupidity at having trusted Joe. He wouldn't make the same mistake again!

The cab Joe was in stayed a block to two blocks ahead. Arnold's driver seemed to know the art of following another car. He clung to it like a bloodhound.

In the back seat Arnold was trying to puzzle things out. That Joe was no ordinary bouncer he was now positive. No man with the ability to deal off the top and the bottom of the deck so casually as Joe had done it would be just a bouncer. Bouncers were generally ex-fighters who had begun to lose too many fights in the ring, and turned to steadier work in their own line.

Some wrestlers were good at acting friendly while pulling dirty deals. Joe had the build to be a wrestler.

But if Joe were a pro turned bouncer he wouldn't have been such a sucker for a left to the jaw. There was no question the man knew the ins and outs of fighting, but not as an ex-pro.

Or was it, Arnold asked himself, that he was so keyed up that his reflexes were superfast? That might be it.

"I could catch him," the driver said, half turning his head.

"Maybe later," Arnold said. "I'd like to wait until he stops and see where he's going."

"You a cop?" the driver asked conversationally.

"No," Arnold said. "The guy in that cab knocked me down. I want to ask him what for."

"Know him?" the driver asked.

"He said his name is Joe," Arnold said. "He was the bouncer at that club where you picked me up."

"Sure, I know him," the driver said. "What'd he knock you down for?"

"That's what I want to find out," Arnold said bitterly. "Do you know where he's headed? Do you know where he lives?"

"I know where he's going, if it's Joe," the driver said. "But Joe's a friend of mine. I think you'd better tell me more before we go any further."

He pulled over to the curb and braked to a quick stop.

"I was with a girl named Mary," Arnold said hastily. "It was in that club."

"Mary?" the driver said. "Work over at the hotel in the cocktail lounge?"

"Yes," Arnold said.

"I know her too," the driver said. "No wonder Joe knocked you down. He has a crush on Mary."

"Oh!" Arnold said. "That explains a lot! Do you know where Mary lives? If you do, never mind about Joe."

"Yeah," The driver said. "But at four in the morning? Why don't you wait and see her at work tomorrow? I'll take you to the hotel. You get some sleep. Tomorrow afternoon drop down to the cocktail lounge and she'll be there."

Arnold hesitated, then agreed. The driver started the cab. A few minutes later he stopped at the hotel. Arnold got out and started to pay him, then remembered the ten dollar bill.

"Keep the change," he said.

"Thanks," the driver said.

Arnold watched him drive away. The cab was a block away when Arnold began to wonder how the driver had known he was staying at the



hotel. He looked around for another cab to follow and find out. There was none in sight, so he shrugged and went into the hotel and up to his room.

**H**E WAS UNDRESSED when the memory struck him that he had a reservation on the nine o'clock plane to New Mexico. He glanced at his watch. It was four-twenty.

He lit a cigarette, put on his bathrobe, and sat down to think things out.

There was, first of all, the job the doctor had asked him to do. It wasn't exactly right to run out on that; but on the other hand they could and would get someone else to do it. That was sure. They probably had already. Almost certainly they had considered the possibility of him either turning the thing down in the first place, or not succeeding; and had one or two other prospects on their list of "trouble-shooters."

It wasn't really a cowardly act to run out, even though Mary had put it on that basis. And even her putting it on that basis didn't bother him too much except that for some reason it had gotten under his skin to have her say it. Or was it as impersonal as that? Had he fallen for Mary?

Perhaps. At least enough so that he knew he couldn't just catch the plane in the morning and go out of her life, never to see her again.

In fact, he now realized, he would go back into that dream world and try to get through the snowstorm and straighten out the dream lives of those twenty people if by doing so Mary would be friendly to him.

But why hadn't she come back? Why had she run away when he was dragged out of the cab by Joe? Did she know Joe had a crush on her? Was she afraid of him?

There was a score to settle with

Joe, too. Arnold felt the tender spot over his solar plexus where Joe's fist had sunk in. There was a purple bruise there the size of his belt buckle.

If he were to catch that plane Mary would believe he had also run from Joe. Joe would probably never confess that Arnold had risen from the sidewalk where he had been lying in agony when Mary sped away in the cab, and had whipped him.

"Yah," Joe would say disgustedly to Mary. "The yellow coward lay there pleading with me to lay off. I let him go and he ran down the street as fast as he could go."

Arnold gritted his teeth in frustrated rage at the mental picture. Life would be intolerable wherever he went, with the knowledge that Mary was convinced he was a coward.

So there was no question about it. He would stay and see things out. He would make Joe sorry he had ever laid a finger on him. He would show Mary or make Joe admit to Mary that he could lick him any time he chose. He would go back into the dream world to further convince Mary he was no coward.

After that? Arnold frowned. There was something not quite appealing to being serious about a girl you had had to prove to that you weren't a coward. It was starting off on the wrong foot, really.

Arnold awoke with a start. He had fallen asleep in the chair. His cigarette had fallen to the rug and gone out without doing any damage. He glanced at his watch. It was seven-thirty.

His whole body tingled with exhaustion as he stumbled to bed. He closed his eyes. The vision of Dr. Bridewell rose in front of him, his thick contact lenses gleaming reproachfully at him. But Dr. Bridewell was the taxi driver that had brought him to the hotel, and he didn't have

contact lenses at all. It was just the way the light shone on them.

An insistent ringing broke through Arnold's consciousness. He opened his eyes. It was the telephone. He reached out and answered it.

"Good morning, Mr. Taschereau," the operator's voice sounded. "The airport just called. They said you have a reservation on the nine o'clock plane to New Mexico."

"Tell them to cancel it," Arnold said. He dropped the receiver and turned over, sound asleep.

**H**E AWOKE to a splitting headache. His watch said two-thirty. He climbed out of bed carefully, his muscles aching during the lulls in his headache. A hot shower and a stiff bromo made him feel better.

In the lobby he peeked into the cocktail bar. Mary wasn't there yet. In the hotel dining room the waiter was inclined to argue about serving breakfast in the middle of the afternoon. He and Arnold compromised on tomato juice, toast and coffee. When that was over it was almost four o'clock.

Arnold peeked into the cocktail bar again. Mary still wasn't there. He went in anyway. There were people sitting here and there with drinks in front of them.

He went up to the bar. The bartender was dawdling. After five intolerable minutes he deigned to notice Arnold and came over.

"When does Mary come to work?" Arnold asked.

"One o'clock," the bartender said. "She didn't show up today."

"Damn!" Arnold exclaimed. "Where does she live?"

The bartender eyed him suspiciously. Arnold sighed and took out a five dollar bill.

The place was a four story walkup apartment building. There were several in the block, differing only in the number painted in worn gilt on the entrance.

Arnold climbed the stairs to the third floor and knocked on the door. It was opened by a gum-chewing girl, blonde, about thirty.

"Mary didn't come home last night," she said in answer to Arnold's question. "I'm worried, too. It's the first time she never came home."

"Never came home?" Arnold echoed.

The girl eyed him owlishly and stepped back invitingly. Arnold went in. She closed the door.

"Yes," the girl said. "I'm terribly worried." She took a worn handkerchief from a small dress pocket and started to cry. She moved a step toward Arnold, her shoulders and head bent, her hand holding the handkerchief to her eyes.

Arnold looked around for a place to back up. It was too late. The blonde head was against his chest.

"There, there," he said paternally, putting his arms awkwardly around her shoulders. There were flakes of dandruff at the thin edges of her scalp.

She crept closer in a pathetic way. Her hands left her eyes and clutched at his coat lapels. Arnold patted her shoulder blades comfortingly. Seemingly unconsciously her arms crept around him. Her shoulders were shaking gently as she appeared to cry.

"What do you suppose could have happened to her?" she asked. She raised her head and drew her shoulders back, pressing against him, looking into his eyes with questioning innocence. Her eyes were quite dry.

A smile quirked Arnold's lips. He gently disengaged her and, walking over to a chair, sat down.

She studied him, her jaw working slowly on the gum. Arnold read in her

expression that she had decided he was just dumb.

"Look," he said. "Do you know a guy named Joe that's a bouncer at some nightclub?"

"Joe? Joe?" She shook her head, but Arnold saw that she was pretending.

"I think Joe has her," Arnold said, not knowing whether it was a lie or not. "I was with Mary last night. Joe showed up and picked a fight with me. I think afterward he must have made Mary go with him."

He watched the effect of this on the blonde. It's implication was that Joe had knocked him out and when he came to Joe and Mary were gone.

"Maybe Mary has his address somewhere in her things," she said. "I'll go look. You wait here."

She went into another room. Arnold waited, feeling frustrated and completely ineffectual. Nothing could have happened to Mary. She had gone off in the cab while he was fighting with Joe. The cab had come back. The driver hadn't acted like anything had happened to her. Where had she gone? Obviously not here where she lived. But wherever it had been, she had gone willingly. Her not showing up for work probably meant she had chosen to lose a day's pay rather than see him again. Maybe that's all her not coming home amounted to. She had known he could find out some way where she lived, and had stayed at some other girlfriend's house.

It was the element of doubt that was keeping him from forgetting the whole thing, Arnold knew. The element of doubt backed by Joe's too expert dirty fighting, and that second cab driver's too sure knowledge of things he had no way of knowing. Those things were just enough to make Arnold unable to accept the brushoff, as it seemed on the surface, until he had seen Mary and learned from her that that was

what it was intended to be.

THE BLONDE came back into the room. She was carrying an envelope and a sheet of stationery. Her eyes were on it as if she were reading it.

"I just found this on Mary's dresser," she said absently. "I don't know when she left it there. It's to me."

She finished reading it and handed it to Arnold without speaking. He took it and read it.

"Dear Joan," it read. "I didn't want to wake you when I came in. I'm taking a trip to Venus and have to catch the nine o'clock plane. Just taking a few things with me. Take care of everything while I'm gone." It was signed, "Mary".

"She must have come home after all," the blonde said. "I guess I was asleep when she was here."

"Thanks for letting me read that, Joan," Arnold said.

He gave it back to her and left, running down the stairs to the waiting cab. Back at the hotel he told the desk clerk to get him a seat on the next plane to New Mexico, and with a bellhop in tow went up to his room to check out.

Questions were rushing through his mind in a torrent. Why had Mary taken the nine o'clock plane? Had she learned he had a seat on it? He had probably told her so and forgotten about it. Of course he had! He remembered now. When he told her he was running out on the doctor he had said he had a seat on the nine o'clock plane.

That meant she had taken that plane to follow him! Suddenly he was happy. Everything had changed. Rather than running out on him, giving him the brushoff, she had gone after him. How could she have learned that he would cancel his seat and stay to look for her!

The phone rang. It was the room clerk saying that the next plane would

leave in half an hour. He could just make it. The bellhop helped him with his travel bags.

In the lobby a precious five minutes was wasted paying his bill. The bellhop had his bags in the cab, waiting, when he reached the sidewalk.

The cab driver broke a few laws. At the airport they were waiting to rush him through. He paid for the ticket and climbed the ramp to the plane. A porter was rushing his bags to the cargo loading hatch. The battery truck was waiting under a wing to get the motors started.

The stewardess conducted him to a window seat, went back down the aisle. The door closed. The plane was sealed. One of the motors turned over, coughed, and began to roar fitfully. Another and another, until all four motors were turning over. Outside, the traffic officer waved his arms, signaling. The plane moved out into the field.

Arnold looked around inside the plane. All the seats seemed to be full. It was the usual assortment of strange faces. People starting a vacation or business trip. Nine out of ten were on their way to the Moon or Mars or Venus. None of the faces were familiar.

Arnold fastened his seat belt. It didn't go right. He looked closely at the strap buckle. It was bent a little out of line. With a little coaxing the strap went in. Just as he was about to look up again he noticed a stain on his finger.

It was an ink stain.

The roar of the four motors, muted by the soundproof walls of the plane, increased in pitch. The paved strip outside began to move backwards. It moved with increasing speed, then dropped down. The plane was in the air.

Arnold's eyes came back to the ink stain. They left it and looked out the

window at the receding landscape below. This plane was nonstop to the spaceport.

**A**N URGE rose in him to run to the emergency door and leap out. If there had been chutes on passenger planes he might have used one to leave the plane and get back to the city; but no plane carried chutes.

Frustration. It rose in his mind again, possessed him like a cloying spirit.

That note had been so pat. Its words had fitted into his wishes like a key fitting the lock it was made for.

But if Mary had written it in the small hours of the morning, he couldn't have smeared his finger with ink from it in the afternoon.

Either Joan had written it herself while she was in that other room, or Mary had been hiding in there and had written it to get him out of town. It couldn't have been Joan unless someone had told her that he had had a seat reservation on the nine o'clock plane.

It must have been Mary. Arnold's thoughts became bitter. Mary had been in that other room all the time he was there. She didn't want him around. She was so anxious to get rid of him that she was willing to send him on a useless chase to New Mexico.

She had written the note and had Joan take it out to him. And it had worked.

Too bad she hadn't blotted it more carefully. Then he might have chased all the way to Venus looking for her.

\* \* \*

Remorselessly the lonely years settled around him. The years during which he had travelled from place to place, courting death in a dozen different guises, always subconsciously searching. Searching for—Mary.

Yes. It had always been a search for Mary. He hadn't known what she

would look like, or where or when he would first meet her. In his innermost thoughts he had had the naive belief that the fitness of things would ordain that when he found her she would have been looking all her life for him.

Instead, she had hidden behind a closed door in another room, and written a "note" designed to drive him far away—get rid of him. She had been there. She could have stepped out through the door. She could have stood there and said, "Hello, Arnold." But she hadn't.

Arnold rose and walked down the aisle to the tail of the plane. In the wash room he washed the ink stain off his finger. He washed his hands clean.

"Twice in twenty-four hours I've washed my hands of something," he thought.

Outside the washroom he stopped to get a cup of coffee from the stewardess.

"How soon will we land?" he asked conversationally.

"In another hour," she replied. "There'll be a two hour wait for the Venus ship, if that's where you're going."

"What made you think I was going to Venus?" Arnold asked. He eyed her curiously.

She shrugged. "It was just that most people catch the plane that will get them to Spaceport the last thing before sailing time."

"Oh," Arnold muttered.

He went back to his seat with the coffee. He sipped it occasionally, and watched the terrain slip by ten thousand feet below.

Someone slipped into the seat beside him. He frowned in annoyance and turned to see who it was.

**IT WAS THE** stewardess. She gave him a friendly smile. He looked

at her clear, unpowdered face, her frank blue eyes. He returned her smile halfheartedly.

"How's the coffee?" she asked.

Arnold's smile broadened. She undoubtedly knew how the coffee was. It made a nice opening gambit, that question.

"Oh, all right," he said.

"You sounded back there like you were suspicious," she went on in a tone that implied the conversation had been well established.

I'll bet, Arnold thought, that her next statement will be that she's through with her run when we reach Spaceport.

"No," he said aloud. "It's just that I've been running into too many coincidences. Last night a cab driver knew which hotel I was staying at without my telling him. When you talked as though you knew I was going to Venus it made me wonder."

"Oh," the stewardess said. She stretched her arms in front of her and stifled a polite yawn. "I'll be glad when we land," she added casually. "Then my run is over. I'll be off for fourteen hours."

"Dinner?" Arnold invited.

"Oh!" She pretended surprise. "I didn't mean to hint."

"I didn't think you did," Arnold lied. "Or I wouldn't have invited you."

"Well... all right," she accepted. "I'll meet you in the waiting-room twenty minutes after we land. I have to check out."

"O.K.," Arnold said. "I'll be there."

After she had left him he looked at the plane personnel listed on a board beside the pilot compartment door. He found at the bottom of the list, "Stewardess: Miss Nancy Race."

Nancy Race, Arnold thought. Nancy isn't a bad name. Always sounds ungrownup though.

NANCY looked quite grown up when she met him in the waiting-room, however. She had changed into a very becoming pastel green nylon dress that did things to her that every dress should do to every girl. Her skin was a more healthy pink than ever in contrast to the green. Her dark brown, almost black hair seemed to pick up the pink of her face and the green of her shoulders and reflect them from its depths.

Arnold wondered why she had practically picked him up when she could undoubtedly have her pick of men who hadn't just been given the brushoff by a girl who works in a cocktail lounge.

He took her arm as they went through the exit door to the taxi stand. In the taxi she laid her arm between them on the seat. He took her hand. She neither responded nor drew away.

He held her hand and thought about this while the taxi sped toward the business district of Spaceport. It was fairly dark now. The streetlights shone through the car windows, lighting up Nancy's features intermittently. They held a faraway look.

Suddenly Arnold leaned forward and kissed her. When she didn't draw away he pressed his lips against hers more firmly. She responded, her lips pressing into his.

When he drew away she didn't move her head, but looked at him, her eyes half veiled. He kissed her again. She put her arms around his neck.

Arnold put his arms around her waist and drew her close. He closed his eyes—and Mary's face looked at him from his mind's eye. It wasn't accusing. He looked at it objectively. It wasn't as beautiful as Nancy's face. In many ways it was almost plain. But it was there.

Arnold disengaged his arms and sat back. Nancy laid her head back on the cushion of the seat and watched him without speaking.

The cab slipped into thick traffic. Several blocks of this and it drew into the curb at the entrance to an ornate restaurant.

Inside, they were shown to a table against the wall. They ordered, then looked at each other while they waited. Arnold offered Nancy a cigarette. When she declined, he lit one for himself.

"You're in love with someone, aren't you?" Nancy asked casually.

"No," Arnold said quickly. "That is, it takes two to make a thing like that."

"You love her and she doesn't love you," Nancy said. "Is that it?"

"No," Arnold denied. "It's just that—well, I met a girl last night. She ran away. I tried to find her and couldn't, though I think she could have at least told me she didn't want anything more to do with me."

"That seems strange," Nancy said thoughtfully.

The waiter brought the soup. They were silent until he had left.

DURING the next hour Arnold gradually told her the entire story. She listened gravely, asking questions now and then to keep him going. He came to the part about the note Joan had brought from the other room, then told how he hadn't seen the ink stain on his finger until the plane was taking off.

"You gave the note back to Joan?" Nancy asked. At Arnold's nod she asked, "Do you know whether or not it was in Mary's handwriting?"

"I'd never seen her handwriting," Arnold answered.

"You're sure that ink stain came from that note?" Nancy persisted.

"I didn't touch anything freshly written but that," Arnold answered.

"How about at the hotel?" Nancy asked. "Did you pay your bill as you left? Did they give you a receipt?"

Arnold reached into his breastpocket

and brought out the hotel bill. It was an i.b.m. receipt, with no handwriting on it. Nancy looked at it with him, then sat back.

"I'd suggest you take the Venus ship," she said, finally.

"Why?" Arnold asked. "Oh, I see. You agree that it was to get rid of me. You're advising me to take the trip and forget about her. That right?"

"No," Nancy said. "I think Mary will be on that ship. I think the note was just what it seemed to be—not what the ink stain implied." She paused, laying her arms on the table and crossing her fingers together. "There are so many other explanations of that ink stain that might be true," she went on. "The note could have been written with a cheap everwriting pen. The ink in them never gets completely dry. Or your finger could have been damp for some reason and moistened the ink as you held the note."

Arnold's eyes grew bright with hope.

"I believe you're right," he said. He glanced at his watch. "I'll have to run," he said, rising. "There's just time for me to get out to the spaceport terminal and check in."

"Us," Nancy said, rising with him. "I'm going along."

"You can't!" Arnold said in surprise.

"You can't stop me," Nancy said. "I have just as much of a right to take a trip to Venus—as anybody." She tossed her head defiantly.

**A**RNOLD and Nancy held hands as they ran from the taxi into the spaceport depot. Her heels tapped rapidly on the marble floor, attracting the attention of the man behind the counter who was just closing the passenger list for the ship.

In moments they were through the red tape and running for the elevator. The elevator dropped them to the sub-

way platform. They waited impatiently in the one car train. Five minutes later a uniformed man came out of the elevator with the passenger list. He got on the car.

The car gained speed smoothly and rapidly, rushing through the underground tube out into the rocket take-off field. The three miles to the take-off area consumed five minutes. When the subway car stopped, Arnold and Nancy ran to the waiting elevator that would carry them up through the heart of the concrete launching frame to boarding level.

A few minutes later they were securely encased in the mountainous sponge rubber shock cushions that dotted the take-off deck.

Arnold clamped his teeth on the breathing tube as the front half of the shock cushion folded in on him. There was nothing else to do now until the ship was safely above the stratosphere, steady on its course, everything functioning smoothly. When that time came, the passengers would be released. Until that time, safe in the sponge rubber buffer, the passengers would not be hurt even if the ship turned and plunged to the ground at express train speed.

There were ingredients in the air that came through the breathing tube that acted as a mild sedative. He felt them take effect, quieting his nerves but not making him sleepy.

His stomach told him when the ship began to rise. An unbelievably short time later the front half of his soft prison opened. He was free to step out.

\* \* \*

Nancy was beside him instantly, her eyes alight with excitement.

"Are we really on our way?" she asked.

"Yes," Arnold said. "Haven't you ever ridden on a spaceship before?"

"No," she said.

"Well, I'll be—" Arnold said slowly.

"Come on. Let's go upstairs."

There were four elevators forming a square tube that ran in the longitudinal axis of the ship. Arnold and Nancy entered one of these elevators.

"We'll go to the lounge," Arnold explained. "We wait there until we're called to be assigned our staterooms."

Nancy stayed close to his side, a smile of excitement on her face. Arnold stole her a glance now and then, wondering.

"Mary begins to seem something far away," he thought. "I almost hope she isn't on board."

That thought made him look around at the others in the elevator. His eyes came to rest on the face of a man near the elevator. He stiffened in surprise.

"What is it, Arnold?" Nancy asked, feeling his tenseness against her.

Arnold bent over and whispered in her ear.

"That man by the door," he said. "I'd swear he's the first cab driver. The one that drove Mary away last night when Joe and I were fighting on the sidewalk."

Nancy's eyes shot toward the door. Arnold straightened up and studied the man closely.

HE WAS looking off into space in a bored way. There was no slightest doubt now. It was the cab driver. But what was he doing on board a ship going to Venus? He was wearing an ordinary business suit. His clothes were neither new nor old, and were better quality than the average cab driver can afford.

Nancy tugged at Arnold's sleeve. He bent down.

"That proves what I suspected," she whispered. "There's dirty work in this somewhere. Let's keep our eye on him."

Arnold nodded.

The elevator came to a stop. The

doors opened. The cab driver was the first to get out. When Nancy and Arnold emerged a minute later he was settling into an overstuffed chair along the circular wall with the tired ease of one who has nothing to do and days to do it in.

Arnold automatically classified him as an experienced space traveller from that. And that added even more to the mystery.

His eyes left the cab driver and roamed about the huge lounge that covered a full cross section of the ship. There were other people emerging from the elevators and walking about across the floor.

Arnold's hand came up and gripped Nancy's arm. He pointed by nodding his head in the direction of a man who had just come out of another elevator.

"There's the other cab driver," he said. "The second one. The one who talked me out of following Joe, and who knew where I was staying without my telling him."

"And there's Joe!" Nancy said, pointing at another man.

Arnold looked in the direction she had pointed. Joe was sitting in a chair, his huge frame relaxed against its back. His legs were crossed, one foot rocking idly.

"The two cab drivers and Joe!" Arnold said. "Now I'm sure Mary will be on board. But—I can't understand it. Why should they be here?"

"That should be obvious," Nancy said. "They knew you were going to be on board."

"But I wasn't!" Arnold objected. "I was going to turn around and go back until you pointed out to me the other way that ink stain could have gotten on my finger!"

"They didn't know that," Nancy said. "Look around and see if you can find Mary. Everyone will be right here in this room pretty soon."



Arnold let his eyes roam about the lounge, now and then bringing them to rest on each of the three, the two cab drivers and Joe.

But inside him a chill was creeping into his mind. Something had clicked into place. Nancy had known who Joe was, had recognized him and pointed him out to him. Nancy, who was an airline stewardess, not supposed to know Joe. Nancy who had at a moment's notice thrown up her airline job to come with him on this ship to Venus.

MARY CAME out of the elevator.

She walked almost straight toward Arnold, passing within a few feet of him, without seeing him. He reached out a hand as if to stop her, but didn't.

The reason he didn't was because he saw that her eyes were fixed intently on Joe.

"Look!" Nancy said, jerking his sleeve.

Arnold looked where she directed. The first cab driver, the one who had taken Mary away in his cab, was following her quickly.

Even as they looked he caught up with her. His hand gripped her arm. She stopped. He spoke to her rapidly. Her eyes darted over toward Arnold for a fraction of a second that made his heart leap, then drop again as her eyes turned away impersonally.

Arnold's thoughts became confused. If Mary had taken this ship to be with him, then why hadn't she rushed over to him? Why was her glance as cold and impersonal as that of a total stranger?

He felt eyes on him. He looked over at Joe. Joe was looking at him, a derisive smile on his massive face. Arnold realized abruptly that Joe had seen him right at the start, and had been ignoring him.

A dozen impulses fought for release in Arnold's thoughts. To go to Mary and ask her why she ignored him. To go over and ask Joe what it was all about. To ask the two drivers how they happened to be here on a ship to Venus.

Suddenly they left him. He would play the same game as the others. He took Nancy's arm, smiling down at her casually, guiding her across the lounge in the general direction of the spot where Mary and the cab driver stood talking together earnestly.

He passed Mary within a few feet. She looked up at him briefly. He nodded his head at her, an impersonal smile on his lips. She didn't return the greeting. But there was something in her eyes. Was it fear? Arnold had the impression that she was hiding a deep, stark fear.

He didn't look back, but went on to the triangular bar with Nancy. They took stools and ordered drinks. Arnold held Nancy's hand in his at the edge of the counter and toyed with its fingers gravely. There was something comfortable about Nancy, he decided.

"She seemed afraid of something. Did you get that impression?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," Arnold said. "I got it. Maybe she's afraid of me."

"You don't mean that," Nancy said. "But consider the queerness of everything. Two men who were driving cabs last night are on board this ship, apparently anything but cab drivers. A bouncer in a night club is here, lounging in a chair as though that was all he had ever done in his life. Mary, a girl you first saw in the cocktail lounge of the hotel you were staying in, and who ran away from you while Joe was apparently beating up on you and you apparently didn't have a chance to win, is also here, and is deathly afraid of something. So afraid

that she doesn't dare to talk to you."

"And don't forget the girl who was an airline stewardess two or three hours ago," Arnold said, doubling Nancy's middle finger into the palm of her hand. "And who threw up her job without bothering to resign, just to dash off on a trip to Venus with a man she had never seen before."

"Yes," Nancy said quietly. "Don't forget her."

Arnold looked at her sharply. Her eyes looked into his unwaveringly.

**T**WO DAYS passed. They were days during which Arnold and Nancy spent long hours playing cards in the lounge while they waited for some glimpse of Mary or Joe or the two cab drivers. But those four didn't show up. They were apparently staying in their rooms.

Once during each of those days Nancy and Arnold had gone up to the observation room and looked out into space at the almost solid dome of stars, brilliantly cold, the Earth and Moon, large and sharply detailed, and the Sun.

The Sun was an awesome spectacle. There was a special telescope to look at it through. The telescope had a black disc in it to hide the Sun itself. Then all the grandeur of the corona was revealed, with its lazy swirlings of radiant fire that reached outward in a futile attempt at escape.

And during those two days Arnold grew more and more restless for action. The passenger list had been posted. From it he had learned the room numbers of Joe and Mary. Not knowing the names of the two cab drivers he wasn't able to learn their room numbers.

It was the third evening. Arnold and Nancy were playing two-handed rummy.

"Oh!" Arnold said suddenly. "I've

had rummy for three draws and didn't notice it."

He laid his hand down apologetically.

Nancy counted up the score and wrote it down. Then she laid the pencil and score pad aside.

"If I were you," she started. She clamped her lips together and stopped.

"I know what you're thinking," Arnold said. "But is it the right way? I've done quite a bit of knocking around. I've found it's always best to let the other guy make the first move. Of course, up to now the other guy always has. Maybe he won't this time. Then I'll have to."

"So you have decided something is wrong," Nancy said. "You're talking like there's an enemy."

"What else could Joe be?" Arnold asked. "And those two taxi drivers? They maneuvered me like past masters! I wish I knew what they were up to. Nothing makes sense at all."

"I've thought of a way that makes more sense out of things," Nancy said, putting the cards back in the box. "Let's suppose that Mary wasn't a cocktail lounge waitress at all, but took the job in order to meet you or get you to notice her."

"That doesn't make any sense at all," Arnold objected. "There are any number of other ways. Anyway, how could she know I would go in and get a drink there?"

"It'll make more sense in a minute," Nancy said. "I want to ask you, was going into that nightclub where you met Joe your idea or Mary's?"

"I don't know," Arnold hesitated. "We were just going from one place to another. Sort of seeing the nightlife of the town. I didn't know the place existed, of course. It could have been her idea."

"And in that place she said to you that you were either a liar or a cow-

ard." Nancy went on. "Then she got up and left—and Joe stopped you, or tried to. Are you sure it wasn't a put up job?"

"I don't think so," Arnold said, smiling and caressing his knuckles. "I can't imagine anyone letting me use their chin for target practice on purpose."

"Are you sure he worked there as a bouncer?" Nancy asked.

"Why," Arnold said, frowning. "I guess I assumed he did. No. Afterwards he said he'd lost his job because I knocked him out."

"But you don't know he worked there except from what he said," Nancy insisted. "And that taxi. You said it was just cruising along the street?"

"**YES,**" ARNOLD said. "It came around the corner right after I joined Mary on the sidewalk. She flagged it and it stopped."

"It came around the corner," Nancy mused. "It could have been there when she came out of the club. She could have told the driver to go around the block and come back."

"That's no good," Arnold said. "What would she do that for?"

"To make it look like the cab had just been cruising," Nancy said. "Then what happens? Joe comes back. Joe gets in and shoves you with his foot when you try to get in. He and the cab dash down the street. Another cab just happens to be cruising by. You take it and follow Joe, but your driver talks you into going back to the hotel, and knows which hotel it is."

"The way you tell it," Arnold said. "It sounds like it could all tie in. It obviously has to, since the two cab drivers, Joe, and Mary, are all on board. But why? It still doesn't make any sense."

"It does to me," Nancy said.

"Mary did what I might have done in her place. She pretended to think you were a liar or a coward in order to make you want to prove to her you weren't either. You'd do that by chasing after her and taking her back to the hospital with you so she could see for herself. I think she's for you."

"But Joe stops that completely. And the taxi driver speeds off when it would be natural for Mary to at least wait and see how the fight turned out. Where'd he take her? Home? Her roommate said no until she found the note. And the note was designed to make you drop the job you had completely and rush to catch this ship. It almost slipped up because of the wet ink, but it worked."

"Then you think that Joe and the two cab drivers were deliberately trying to keep me from going back to the hospital and doing my job?" Arnold asked incredulously. "Why? What possible connection could that have with it?"

"That's the missing link," Nancy said with a firm nod. "It could be the doctors are wrong, and that the dream world has some connection with this world."

"I wonder," Arnold said slowly. "You know, when I first saw Mary in the cocktail lounge at the hotel she reminded me of the picture of one of the persons in that dream world."

Arnold sat up, a startled look on his face.

"What is it?" Nancy asked.

"I just thought of a possible explanation," Arnold said. "Those people in that dream world are still alive, legally. If one of them were heavily insured the beneficiary couldn't collect until he or she actually died. There's trouble in that dream world that makes the doctors call in a trouble-shooter to straighten things out. Suppose it didn't work? Suppose I, the

trouble-shooter, am enticed into a trip to Venus? And the doctors have to give up and let all those twenty die?"

"That makes sense," Nancy said excitedly. "They use Mary for bait. Maybe against her will." She glanced hastily at Arnold. "Certainly against her will," she corrected.

"Then the thing for me to do," Arnold said, standing up, "is to go pin Mary down. Find out for sure. If it's true, then I'll talk the captain into letting me return to Earth in one of the lifeboats."

"**W**ANT TO come in with me, Nancy?" Arnold asked in a low voice.

"No," Nancy said. "You go in alone. I'll stay here at the end of the corridor and watch."

Arnold looked down at her. She was nervous, worried for him. Yet she was letting him go into Mary's room alone. On impulse he took her face between the palms of his hands and kissed her.

When he walked down the corridor to Mary's room he looked back. Nancy was standing there, her eyes following him, a dazed, happy expression on her face. He wanted to go back and put his arms around her and forget all about Mary. But he turned his back to Nancy and knocked on Mary's door.

"Come in," Mary's voice sounded from inside.

Arnold turned the knob and opened the door. He glanced once more at Nancy, then stepped inside.

Mary was standing in the center of the room, her eyes two coals of light. Arnold closed the door at his back. Only then did he see the man who had been standing behind it.

The man was the first cab driver. He held a gun in his fist. The gun was pointed at Arnold.

"What took you so long?" the cab

driver asked good naturedly. "We've been waiting two days for you. We expected you the minute the passenger list was posted."

The bedroom door opened. Joe stepped out. He left the door open. A moment later the second cab driver stepped out. The three stood looking at Arnold. Mary remained where she was, a strained expression on her face.

"Looks purty, doesn't he, Mary," Joe said. He stepped toward Arnold slowly. Suddenly his hand shot out and knocked Arnold sideways.

Arnold staggered under the unexpected blow. He tried to straighten and get his bearing. Two large hams enfolded his head. Joe's knee came up into his stomach viciously. He doubled over, retching.

"That's enough, Joe," one of the two cab drivers said.

"But I owe it to the guy," Joe said pleadingly. "And I want to change his face so Mary won't like him so well."

"That's enough," the cab driver said.

Arnold rolled over onto his back and looked up through pain blurred eyes.

"What's it all about?" he gasped. "That's all I want to know. What's it all about?"

The second cab driver, the one who had known too much, came and stood over Arnold, a serenely amused expression on his face.

"It's very simple, Mr. Taschereau," he said. "You see, we plan to murder you. That's all you need be interested in. We plan to get rid of your body here in space. It will never be found. No corpus delicti, no murder charge. Especially if no suspicions are aroused while we're doing it."

"You'll never get away with it," Arnold said.

"Oh, you mean the young lady out in the corridor?" the cab driver said.

"What young lady?" Arnold asked. "You mean the one that is listening just outside the door? She'll run the minute the knob starts to turn, and tell the captain." He spoke loudly.

With a muttered exclamation the first cab driver sprang to the door. Arnold's foot shot out in his way, catching him so that he dive headlong into the base of the door. His gun slid an inch. It lay on the rug just at the tip of his fingers.

Arnold rolled over twice before he reached it. His fingers closed around it. In a continuation of his roll he sat up against the wall and swung the gun around toward the other cab driver.

**B**EFORE HE could pull the trigger a flash of black streaked past his face. There was a sharp pain in his wrist. He dropped the gun. Joe had kicked it out of his hand.

Joe bent over and picked it up. It was a mistake. Arnold's knee caught him somewhere in the face. The blow brought Joe to his knees.

His hand that held the gun was on the floor. Arnold brought his heel down on the back of that hand. Bending forward swiftly, he pulled the gun free from Joe's paralyzed fingers.

He had it by the barrel. He couldn't get his other hand around to make a switch, and dared not try anything with one hand.

Joe was shaking his head and trying to rise. Arnold tapped him ungentle on the head. Joe's body went limp, sprawling onto Arnold's legs, imprisoning them.

But now Arnold's hands were free. He switched the gun around and swung its muzzle toward the other cab driver. There was the sound of a shot. Arnold answered it with a shot from the gun he held.

He saw a dark hole appear in the

coat-sleeve of the cab driver. The gun the cab driver held slipped from his fingers.

"Don't pick it up," Arnold warned.

Joe groaned and started to move. Arnold brought the gun down sharply on his head again. Joe's body twitched. Arnold doubled his knees so that Joe slid off his legs.

He got to his feet by sliding his back up the wall until he was erect. He stood there, swaying slightly, but in full command of the situation.

**"T**HANK GOD!" Mary cried. She stepped toward Arnold, her arms going out to him.

"Stand back, Mary," Arnold said, pointing the gun toward her. When she stopped, a surprised expression on her face, he added lamely, "You might get in the line of fire in case I have to shoot somebody."

"Oh," she said weakly; but Arnold saw that she knew he had suspected her.

He went over and picked up the other gun, pocketing it. Then he went to the door and rolled the still unconscious cab driver out of the way. Opening the door, he called for Nancy to come in.

She came in quickly. She had been just outside the door. Sizing things up briefly, she looked at Arnold and smiled triumphantly.

"So you have them all," she said.

"It looks like it," Arnold grinned. "Can you handle a gun." He took the second gun from his coat pocket and gave it to her.

He turned away from Mary's hurt look with his face slightly red. Then he turned back to her angrily.

"I can't help it, Mary," he said. "I don't know what this is all about. I don't know what your part in it is, either. Until I know, and know positively, I don't know who to trust." He

turned to the cab driver. "And now's the time for you to start talking," he said grimly. "I've had all I can stomach."

The man shrugged his shoulders. Arnold reached him in two swift steps and brought the point of his gun viciously against his collar bone. He heard the bone snap.

"Talk," he said. "Talk or I'll break some more bones."

"What do you want to know?" the man said.

"Why do you want to kill me?" Arnold demanded.

"You mean kill you first," the man answered.

"Kill me first?" Arnold echoed. "Are you crazy? The first time I ever saw you was last night. There's no reason why I would have been even interested in you. You were just a cab driver!"

"You were hired to kill us," the man said doggedly. "Joe was at the hospital. He heard you and Dr. Bridewell talking about it. He put his ear to the doctor's door and heard him say, 'There are only three. I probably make it sound very coldblooded, but I'm sure you will find they need killing.' He heard some more after that. Enough to know you agreed to take the job."

"This is all a mistake," Arnold said, laughing in relief. "We weren't talking about real people. Joe just didn't understand. I can see how he came to that conclusion though, even though it's wrong. But—" He turned to Nancy. "Maybe I was right about what I figured out. These three want those twenty to die so they can collect some insurance. They had a guilty conscience. They figured Dr. Bridewell knew about their scheme and was hiring me to kill them."

"It looks like it, Arnold," Nancy said.

"No!" Mary spoke up. "That isn't true."

"Maybe you'll tell me the answers then, Mary," Arnold said. "You aren't under the power of these three any more. You can speak freely and tell me what's happened—and why."

"I—I thought all along that you knew," Mary said hesitantly. "I thought you knew and were just playing with me. Pretending you didn't know. Your coming into the cocktail lounge and deliberately spilling your drink on your suit so I'd have to pay attention to you made me think that."

"That was an accident," Arnold said. "Anyway, what was I supposed to know all along?"

"When you told me about Dr. Bridewell hiring you to kill Joe, Benny, and Fred, I was certain that you knew I knew them, and that you could get to them through me."

"The two cab drivers are Benny and Fred?" Arnold said. "Glad to know you. But whatever gave you the idea I was hired to kill them? It was three guys in that dream world, not three real people."

"Don't you understand?" Mary said exasperatedly. "THIS IS THE DREAM WORLD!"

"You shouldn't have told him, Mary," the cab driver, Benny, said. "Now he'll kill me and Fred and Joe."

ARNOLD looked from one face to another, his mind shaken, his thoughts trying to bring rationality out of chaos. His eyes finally settled on Nancy's face pleadingly.

"It can't be true, can it Nancy?" he asked. "You're not just a dream are you?"

"What Mary said is true, Arnold," Nancy said quietly.

"But it just can't be," Arnold said. He stamped his foot on the floor. "See? The floor is perfectly solid. It

Benny moved suddenly. He got behind her and took her gun away from her . .



isn't the stuff that dreams are made out of. It's real."

No one answered him.

"I went into the dream world," Arnold said. "Remember? I told both of you girls about that. I got stuck in a snowdrift and asked to be taken out again. They brought me out of it. I haven't gone back in since. I would have known it if I had."

Benny moved suddenly. He got behind Nancy and took her gun away from her. He backed against a wall, holding her in front of him as a shield, the gun in his hand pointed at Arnold.

"Drop your gun, Arnold," he said. "I'll kill you if you don't."

Beads of perspiration were standing out on his forehead. Arnold stared at him stupidly for a minute.

"His collar bone's broken, Nancy," he said. "He can't hold you if you struggle."

Benny pulled the trigger of his gun just as Nancy moved. She spoiled his aim. Benny let her go and brought the gun up again.

Arnold fired without aiming. The bullet caught Benny in the chest. Arnold watched him warily until he had dropped his gun and sunk to the floor.

Then he turned around and looked down at Fred, the other cab driver. Benny's bullet had ploughed into Fred's back, killing him instantly.

Joe was trying to turn over on his back. He had just come to and didn't know what had happened.

Mary ran and threw herself protectively in front of Joe.

"Don't shoot him," she pleaded.

"Why?" Arnold asked dully.

"Because she loves him," Nancy said.

She went to Arnold and took his arm, looking up into his eyes. He tried to look away, but couldn't. He realized suddenly that he hadn't loved Mary. Just as surely he knew that he loved Nancy.

Suddenly he turned his head away, hot tears blinding him. He loved Nancy—and she was just a dream. Somewhere in the world of reality her body, or what was left of it from some accident, lay in a small room, kept alive by serums and pumps.

"Let's go and leave Mary and Joe alone," Nancy said softly.

"Yes," Mary said. "Leave us alone. Go away. Don't come back."

Arnold dropped his gun from limp fingers and let Nancy lead him out through the door. He stood quietly waiting while she turned and closed the door.

Then she took his arm. They walked slowly down the corridor. Nancy took his hand and pulled it around her waist, and wound her own

arm around his. Arnold looked down at her, smiling wanly.

She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were moving, as if in prayer.

Hot tears blinded Arnold's eyes again. He looked away, his vision blurring.

"**D**AMN," he muttered. "I can't see a thing!"

"Well open your eyes then," a familiar voice said.

Startled, Arnold opened his eyes. Around him were the almost forgotten details of the room where he had lain down on the cot and been given the injection that sent him into the dream world.

The internes were loosening the straps that held him still. They were smiling at him.

"You did a wonderful job, Mr. Taschereau," Dr. Bridewell said. "Wonderful."

Arnold looked at the doctor's face. In street clothes, and without the contact lenses, he would have looked exactly like Benny.

"Put on your clothes and come to my office," the doctor said when the internes had loosened all the straps. "Help him get dressed, boys. He's probably still a little weak from the ordeal he's gone through." He turned abruptly and left the room.

Ten minutes later Arnold opened the door to the doctor's office and went in. Dr. Bridewell looked up at him cheerily, his contact lenses reflecting and refracting the light in gargoyleish distortion.

"What I want to know," Arnold said before the doctor could speak to him, "is, why did you have to fool me? Or did you? Why did I land in that snowstorm in the first dream-world, and then apparently come into this very room and then walk out and apparently go back to the hotel, while



all the time I was still under that hood in the dream world?"

"It was a little trick we had to play on you," Dr. Bridewell said seriously. "We had to tell you what you were to do, but we also had to convince you you weren't in a dream world while you did it. Under that drug you're open to hypnotic suggestion. We deliberately sent you into a dream setup where you would get so discouraged so fast that when we brought you out of that and sent you into the other dream world you would be convinced it was the old reality."

"I see," Arnold said. He sat down in a chair near the desk. He looked at the floor, his expression gloomy. Several seconds passed in silence. He sighed and rubbed his hand over his eyes. Dr. Bridewell watched him.

"Could I—" Arnold said haltingly. "That is, is there any law against—my voluntarily going back into that dreamworld? I mean, if I would rather live in that than in the real world, I have plenty of money. I could let the hospital use it, or most of it."

"You mean you want to go back into the dream of those twenty cripples?" Dr. Bridewell asked. "May I ask what your reason is?"

"You may," Arnold said, smiling sadly. "The reason is that I've found a girl in that dream world that I love. I've never found one in real life that I love. And reality is only what you think it to be. That dream world is just as real to those in it as the real world."

"Who is this girl?" Dr. Bridewell asked, smiling.

"Nancy," Arnold said simply.

"Are you sure you know what you're asking?" Dr. Bridewell asked. "Suppose that a year from now, even ten years from now, the desire to return to reality grew too strong in you. If Nancy couldn't return to it with

you, you would be divided in your desires."

"I know what I'm asking," Arnold said. "If I thought I could safely manage it, I would 'have an accident' that would force you to put me in the dream bank. I don't suppose you can understand, being a doctor and a scientist. I love Nancy more than life itself."

"Are you sure it isn't just the effects of what you went through?" Dr. Bridewell persisted.

"Of course it is," Arnold said. "Don't you realize that that is what creates love? The effects are lasting."

"Touche," Dr. Bridewell said, chuckling. "But now I guess I may as well admit that I've played another little trick on you. A rather unfair one."

"Unfair?" Arnold echoed.

"Quite unfair," a voice spoke at Arnold's back.

ARNOLD HALF rose and turned his head at the sound of the voice. Standing near the door was Nancy. She was wearing the white uniform of a nurse. And her flawless face was a nice pink in color.

She turned her eyes away in embarrassment.

"Nancy!" Arnold shouted, jumping out of the chair and taking her in his arms. "Is this still a dream? It must be! But how?" He turned to the doctor. "Is she real?"

"Does it make any difference?" Dr. Bridewell taunted him. "After all, you just insisted you would be willing to 'have an accident' to find her again."

Arnold turned back to Nancy and held her face between his hands, his eyes devouring her features, a happy smile on his face.

Then, suddenly, a change came over him. His eyes widened until they were round.

"Doctor!" Nancy cried, concern appearing on her face. She gripped Arnold around the waist as he sagged against her.

The doctor hastily came around his desk and helped her lower Arnold into the chair.

"Get a pan," he said.

Nancy ran into the next room and returned with a half-moon-shaped pan. Dr. Bridewell placed it under Arnold's chin.

"No," Arnold said, shoving it away. "I'll be all right."

He placed his elbows on his knees and cupped his head in his hands, with his palms.

Nancy and the doctor stood watching him, pity on their faces.

"It was just a game," Dr. Bridewell said after a while.

Arnold's shoulders began to shake with silent sobs.

Nancy dropped down at Arnold's feet and held her head against his neck.

"I'm one too, my darling," she said.

"We had to do it, Arnold," Dr. Bridewell said pleadingly. "The human mind will become endangered unless it is prepared emotionally in some way that will make it willing to accept things. We had to show you things from a disinterested viewpoint. Otherwise—"

"Your dream existence would have become like a beautiful evil flower, an unholy orchid, that wraps its tentacles of madness about you and draws you into its heart where no one can bring you back. Madness.

"We had to take the interests of your life and weave them gradually into things as they really are."

Arnold's hands slowly left his face and went around Nancy's head, drawing her close. His tear dampened cheek pressed against hers. His eyes opened and gazed soullessly at the floor. After a minute they lifted to the doctor.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"You were in a plane accident," Dr. Bridewell said. He laid his hand on Arnold's shoulder, his fingers digging into the flesh. "That mangled remains of your friend Captain Sam Walters—you saw that through my eyes as I wore my portable dream cap. I think that while I have it on, if I were to 'lead' you into that room again, you would be able to see those features as they really are, and accept them, instead of your censor blocking out the truth and substituting those of a friend, symbolically."

"It was me?" Arnold asked.

Dr. Bridewell nodded.

THE END

## TELEPORTED INVASION



By Carter T. Wainwright



**I**N THE low, grim, grey, concrete building the work went on apace. Huge electrical generators, an automatic steam generating plant, weird electrical apparatus—all were poured into the building, to be incorporated into the Machine.

For Doctor Grainlee was building a teleportal.

Irascible, erudite, exotic in his ways, Professor Grainlee, had the money and the talents to indulge himself. And this was to be the culminating experiment of his life. How often had he stood lecturing be-

fore his classes in physics and mathematics, expounding to the receptive graduate students, his scientifically untenable, unshakable belief in the theory of teleportation.

"Subject a material object," he had often said, "to extremes of currents or magnetic fields, or pressures, and I know—my mathematics shows it—it will vanish out of our time and our space—but not out of our ken!" In spite of some half humorous attitudes on the part of his colleagues, he only affirmed his passion more fanatically

and intensively.

And gradually Dr. Grainlee drifted from the circle of university activity...

Time passed and fewer things went into the building. Aided by assistants, the good professor worked night and day, spending countless hours, and incredible effort on his pet project.

Jim Clarman, looking for a story with an unusual twist happened to wander by the building. And in his enthusiasm, he decided that an interview with the recluse and eccentric would be just the thing.

He let himself in the building after no one answered his buzzing. The floors were dusty and an aura of dis-use hung over the corridors. It was easy to find the main labs.

Jim walked in. The place was empty and all in silence. The gigantic generators did not move; only the shuffle of Jim's feet on

the concrete disturbed the silence.

Near the wall hung a fantastic array of equipment, whose most prominent feature was a metal tube about three feet in diameter. Jim approached it and looking into the tube was like looking into interstellar space itself. It was dark and cavernous, and seemed to have no bottom.

Beside the apparatus was a placard, now faded and dusty. Inscribed thereon were the words: "I am gone into hyperspace through the tube you see before you—I am seeking the source of the things. H.K.G." That was all.

Jim stood in front of the large tube and gingerly reached out his hand. As he did so something brushed against it and a distinctly cold and clammy feeling assailed it! Again he ventured to reach, and like a series of invisible tennis balls, some things were coming from the tube.

Jim ran shrieking from the hall...

## THE GRAV-DANCERS



By H. R. Stanton



"CLASS OF '84" was emblazoned in light all across the gymnasium, and the laughing crowd of high school boys and girls were beginning to drift in. The orchestra was already playing. A general air of commencement gayety hung over the impromptu ballroom.

The self-conscious youngsters walked in slowly, a little ill at ease in their flashy green tuxes, but their gorgeously attired girls bore themselves like the little queens they were.

"Gee honey," Fatty McAllister said excitedly to the pretty little brunette at his side, "this is gonna be fun. Dad just got me my new anti-gravs."

"Now don't you get too excited," warned his partner. "Remember how you nearly broke a skylight at the last dance."

"Aw..." protested the portly lad, "I can take care of myself."

"But what about me?" she asked plaintively. "Your gravs are stronger."

Suddenly the Caller's voice boomed through the amplifiers: "Boys and girls, take your partners. First grav now begins."

The crowd shuffled around excitedly, boys arraigning themselves with their partners. It was a pretty spectacle.

Again the speaker boomed: "Follow your curves and execute the whirls. Anyone flying free will be sent off the air until freetime comes! Grab your partners, here we go!"

At that signal, the orchestra burst suddenly into strong welling sound. Simultaneously, like well-trained birds, the three hundred pairs of grav-dancers rose into the air, the little grav-pulsers mounted on

their heels, propelling them smoothly.

Gracefully pirouetting through space, moving in perfect synchronism, wheeling skillfully, diving boldly, swirling madly, the grav-dancers went through their routine.

Any other motion, with the possible exception of ice-skating is awkward compared with grav-dancing, and since it's the rage most youngsters have learned to do it well.

The gymnasium was a vast volume of solidified gracefulness. In perfect rhythm with complete feel for the music, the couples sped and spun through the air, the girls billowing wildly, the boys, green tuxes unruffled.

Laughs and cries of joy and exultance filled the air to be heard even above the music. The grav-dancers were riding "high" tonight.

There was a shriek, a cry of alarm, and three hundred pairs of eyes shot skyward. And there was Fatty, clinging frantically to his partner and racing toward the ceiling. As usual, he'd become too exuberant. Vainly he tried to disengage himself from his girl, who trying to restrain him from rising, found instead, herself rising with him.

Jimmy Bryan cut abruptly and rapidly through the swirl and clamped a hand around one of Fatty's ankles just in time to prevent him from going through another skylight. Another "tragedy" had been avoided.

As soon as Fatty was down to the floor, the dancers resumed and on and on went the mad whirl, far into the commencement night...

# ELEMENTALS OF JEDAR



By Geoff St. Reynard

**Jedar was inhabited by a seemingly rudimentary life form—so naturally the stranded spacemen thought they were safe**

**W**HEN THE great exploring rocket *Meteor Twelve* of Terra's Outer Dark Line came, after months of erratic cruising through the farthest spaceways, to the satellite moon Jedar of the planet Plattara, in the incredibly distant Vernaluc galaxy, her crew had all but resigned themselves to death.

Ken Ripper, the captain and senior

pilot aboard, had been plagued by luck of the evillest kind since the *Meteor Twelve*, shooting out of the Solar system, had wound her inquisitive way through the pure star-pricked blackness of space toward Randarsflite; which bright blue planet was the home port of the marvelous jewel-ships that, less than a hundred years back, had first come poking their little blunt

The crew of the "Meteor Twelve" stood before the screen and stared with sudden fear as the swirling entities rushed upon them . . .



noses out from this strange galaxy to Mars and Venus and Earth, bringing dainty twelve-inch-high men of astonishing bravery and integrity to marvel at the bigness and power and awesomeness of the dwellers in our own great sector of the universe....

Ken Ripper—tall, handsome in a broad-faced, crooked-smiling fashion, strong and healthy as a spaceman must be, just growing gray above the ears—Ken Ripper had barreled his limping ship into the major port of Randarsflite, laid over a week to clear clogged tubes and patch up a hull that had worn thin in dangerous places, and then blasted off into the poorly-charted regions of the farther side of the Vernaluc. He left his chief lieutenant behind on Randarsflite, dying by inches of the Venusian disease. Four days out from the port he slid the radioman—his best friend—into an airlock and read the spaceman's burial service and slipped him out into eternal darkness, the victim of an exploding box of magnesium-fylor super-heat matches. A week later three jetmen were discovered in number two cargo hold, reeling drunk on octorenil balls, the terrible opiate of Mars that kills a man's conscience and then his brain and then, much later, his body...

"Jove and bounding jackrabbits!" said Ken Ripper in his wickedest tones. For some reason this mild exclamation was always the favorite oath of the spaceways, taking precedence even over those wonderful, unprintable strings of words in forty-three languages which every cub who ever rocketed from Terra to Luna learned at his pilot's knee. "Jackrabbits all over hell!" went on the senior pilot, scratching the back of his neck "What next?"

He could have killed the drugging jetmen out of hand, for dope is the

major sin of the whole expanding universe; but he only shook his head sadly and gave them ten days' confinement, for men were scarce in the *Meteor Twelve* and jetmen most valuable of all.

THE TEN days passed, the jetmen went back to work, and for a month the exploring rocket shot on through the great Vernaluc galaxy on her mission; then one morning Ripper and his two remaining co-pilots heard as they were dressing a muffled *whoosh* that came, like the voice of God, from everywhere and nowhere—"What is it?" asked the mute faces of the junior pilots, and, "Come on!" barked Ripper, abandoning his half-donned trousers and giving one terrific jump that carried him clear across the floor to the open door.

James, the bigger of the lieutenants, was the one who found the source of that dull *whoosh*. He called urgently, and the others came, pale and grim and sure in that revealing second that they would all die.

"You should have rayed 'em down," was all James could say. "You should have rayed 'em down when you found them doping, Ken."

For the three erring jetmen, their reflexes slowed and their caution and skill forgotten, had somehow twiddled the wrong wheels and opened the wrong cocks, and the supply of rocket fuel which might have carried the *Meteor Twelve* beyond the universe itself had escaped into the power room and thence into the void. It was a miracle that the terrible energy, seeking escape, had not smashed the ship to microscopic fragments; but a spot on the hull of the power room, unsuspectedly thin, had blown first and the fuel had slammed through and gone its way into black space, taking the trio of debauched jetmen with it.

It was another miracle that James had hesitated with his hand on the power room door, noted the queer swelling of the metal, and turned on his XK-ray for a look inside before opening it....

"Fog-water of Mercury!" he'd muttered, seeing through the door the emptiness of the room and the fringed hole in the hull. Then, "Welders!" he'd bawled. "Torchmen! *Skipper!*"

Without pause for thought they set about sealing off the power room, working on all sides of it but the hull side, calking and overlaying and merging metals together until the old girl was whole again, with no more than a slight tendency to limp to the right as the fingers of incalculable space caught briefly at the flaw in her side. Then Ken Ripper straightened, his brown face serious, and looked at them all.

"Well," he said, his voice turned light and bantering to ease tension, "well, *kanlores*, what do we do now, to put in the time till we die?"

"If I might make a preliminary suggestion—" said Jz, the Martian astrogator.

"Is it a good one?"

"An excellent one," said the four-eyed Martian, grinning. "First, captain, you ought to put on your pants."

**THE** AUXILIARY power room had fuel for perhaps nine days' cruising, if they fed the stuff to the jets from the fuel tube slow and easy, scamping whenever they could; then they would be done for. Three of the precious days passed, while the technicians and the officers crowded the nose of the *Meteor Twelve* and watched hopefully for a landing place. They skirted the sun of Alta Ferrari and rocketed on by the dead world of airless Kartann, and three more days went by, and the fuel dwindled.

"Blast and harry the parsimonious old devils who gave these crates just one decent power room!" said Ken Ripper, and brooded over his rough unreliable charts of the Vernaluc.

"One more drifting museum of mummified spacemen—coming up!" said James to himself, arbitrarily shifting the course two points to the left and immediately wondering why he'd done it.

And, "No man knows where he may die," quoted Jz the young Martian out of the age-old lore of his fatalistic people. "A ship's as good a tomb as any."

Two more days, and then at last only a few hours were left them; and on the port bow a world appeared and grew and swelled into a large planet on the visograf. Ken Ripper called to Marshok, the miniature Vernalucilian whom they'd picked up on Randarsflite to tell them things about his galaxy. "What's that?" he asked, pointing. "I can't find it on the bloody charts."

Marshok took a squint at the planet.

"That's Plattara," he said. "Unexplored, uninhabited, unencumbered with an atmosphere if I remember rightly."

"Hmm," said the senior pilot. "Well, son, in a matter of hours we're going to be a satellite of that un-un-un planet of yours, and I must say I'm happy to know it has at least a name, even if it does sound like the chief course at a Venusian liquid-supper. Go and tell the boys about it, while I check the fuel."

He checked it, knowing to the last force-blast what it would be. No amount of scrimping and saving would conserve it enough to make it last them down to Plattara's main gravity pull; no, he had spoken the truth in that grim jest to Marshok, and the *Meteor Twelve* was destined to turn

herself into a revolving satellite, a minute silver Luna of this outlandish, lifeless planet.

They gathered in the big lounge, all of the crew but a few jetmen and technicians, and they sat in the deep synthe-leather armchairs and stared at each other and talked, in the way spacemen have, with wry little jokes and casual acceptance of their fate. There were James and Worthington, the junior pilots, and Jz the four-eyed Martian astrogator, and Marshok the tiny Vernalucillian. There were seventeen humans from Terra, four red Jovian radarmen from the great spaceports of Jupiter, and a handful of mixed nationalities from Sol's farflung outposts, including a Plutonian cadescentman and a Saturnian smokeman, the one glowing orange and the other a wispy opalescent gray. Wiser and older than them all was Ken Ripper, the captain of the *Meteor Twelve*.

Excepting only Marshok, this strange gang had been running the spaceways together for three years lacking a month, and they knew each other as well as men from different planets ever can; they thought of themselves, not as natives of Mars, of Terra, of Mercury, but as the crew of the *Meteor Twelve*. Not a one but would sacrifice himself for the others. Not a one but would go down to hell with blazing rayguns to save his captain or his ship.

But now no rayguns, no sacrifice, no heroism, no loyalty could stand between these friends and destiny—that macabre destiny that would soon be turning their craft into a metal satellite of the dead planet of the Vernaluc which Marshok called Plattara.

**THEY DRANK** gin in tall black glasses, and made their jokes, and watched the visograf in the lounge showing Plattara ever larger; and as

they all began upon their third drink Jz stood up and pointed at the screen with all twelve rubbery fingers, letting his beaker fall and smash on the floor.

"By the shylann dust of Luna!" he gasped. "Look!"

They all stared, and Ken Ripper said, "It's a moon, *kanlores*."

"It is Jedar," began Marshok, but no one heeded him at all, for they were flying to and fro, the radarmen to their instruments, the technicians to their batteries of controls, the pilots to their seats in the nose, and the calculators to their intricate boards.

"Can we make it?" asked James over the intercom, and Jz answered him: "We can make it."

Marshok's silvery tones threaded the subdued babble that was the whole ship talking to itself. "It is Jedar," he said, "and we do not wish to land there."

They turned to their microphones, all of them, from the nose and the holds, the jetroom and the viewports, and for an instant the whole communication system was one vast snarl; who was this interloper, this stranger, this peewee runt of a Vernalucillian, to tell *them* what *they* wished to do? "Do you crave to be a satellite, little lad?" asked Ripper's cool voice.

"There are tales of Jedar," said Marshok, "which would crisp your hair like a flame from a jet tube. No one ever lands there."

"Aah," said the Saturnian smoke-man, floating around in his seat by a vidoflector and lifting his usually hushed voice to a thin whine, "you and your legends. You make me sick."

"You'll be sicker," warned Marshok, "if you land on Jedar."

"What are the tales?" asked Ken Ripper, for after all there was nothing to do now but let the technicians bring her in to a landing on the moon.



"Tell us the worst of 'em, son."

"The inhabitants of Jedar are elementals," said the little fellow.

"What the blazes is an elemental?" asked somebody.

"Creatures of pure force, of little bodily substance but incredible power," said Marshok. "They are evil, sheer evil, and if they once decide to leave Jedar the galaxies are doomed as surely as though the gods should squeeze together their great hands, in which lies all the universe."

"Egad," drawled Worthington. "My nerves are just cravily with horror."

"Gracious," chimed in James, "we'd better turn around before they see us, hadn't we, girls!" The communication system howled with laughter.

"They're terrible, eh, Marshok?" asked Ripper quietly.

"Terrors like nothing you ever saw," assented the Verulucillian.

"Well, it's try conclusions with them or resign ourselves to being a satellite," said the captain. "I for one prefer to go down fighting something more tangible than space, even if it's only elementals; and I speak for the ship." He could do it because he was senior pilot, and, much more, because he knew his thoughts were always the thoughts of his crew. "How looks the landing chance, James?"

"Not half bad," said his lieutenant, "not really too bloody bad at all. It's neither cratered like Luna, nor watery like that little what's-its-name globe that spins around Pluto. Looks fairly level."

"We'll be down in half an hour," said Jz, the Martian.

They settled back in their seats, the crew of the *Meteor Twelve*, and after a moment's silence Ken Ripper started to hum the verse of *Warping In To Mars*. Others took it up and the chorus thundered out on the intercom.

Now Sol's hot breath dies out behind,  
Above us pale the stars;  
Our ship's a hulk, but—never mind,  
We're warping in to Mars!

"Any minute now," said Jz somewhat later; and soon there was a slight jar, and his voice came clear: "We're in, captain."

"Try the atmosphereith," said Ripper.

"Air thin and bitter," chanted the candescentman from the port side. "Not fit for anybody but maybe Smokey," he added, meaning the pale Saturnian. "You want to go out and check, Smokey?"

"I'm not going anyplace," said the gray smokeman.

"Nor are we," James could not help saying. "Nor are we, any of us, ever any more."

THEN THEY all sat silently, each one looking at death in his mind and finding the prospect somewhat less evil, now that the *Meteor Twelve* was not to be a lone roving hulk spinning in blackness around an alien planet. At last Marshok said, "You'd better put out a force field."

"Why?"

"The elementals. I don't know if we can raise a strong enough field to repel them, but we may as well try."

"Force field," ordered Ken Ripper, and the infinitesimal atom ports that ran in double lines all along the hull opened and began to hum.

"Everybody come to the lounge," said the captain then. "I mean everybody, too. The hell with tinkering over instruments. Bring two of the extra visographs with you, James, Worthington. Cooky, haul up a load of the

oldest vintage gin you can find. Ratharl, bring the charts and figures on all our supplies. Ten minutes, everyone." He switched off the intercom and sat back, sighing. He scratched the back of his neck automatically. It was a gesture he used when he was worried. For a few minutes he watched the small visograf in his cabin, whose beam was set to turn slowly about the ship and reveal any approaching—*things*... Then he rose and stretched his arms, and inhaled deeply, and went out to the lounge.

When they all were there he said, "Tell us about the elementals, Marshok."

The three visografts had been connected together and showed every side of the ship; nothing moved in the white waste of dusty plains around it. Marshok, glancing often at the linked screens, said, "I've told you almost all we know of them. Our knowledge is nearly all legend, you know, for no living man ever saw one. This satellite is taboo."

"Spill the legends, then, sonny," said Worthington.

"They're a kind of force, what sort I don't know, but tremendously powerful. We don't know if they're chained somehow to this planet, or if perhaps they have no desire to leave; but we do know that contact with them is death, sudden and sure. No weapons are effective against them."

"What do they look like?"

"I don't know."

"In other words, if a little brown cross-eyed man with flat feet who's chewing a cigar knocks on the main portside door, we oughtn't to let him in," said James.

"Shut up," said Jz. "I want to hear about these critters."

"You've heard it," fluted Marshok. "I can't tell you any more. I'm sorry.

That's the sum total. Big and bad and omnipotent."

"Remind me not to take my daily stroll around the block, captain," said Ratharl, the Jovian radarman.

"You humorists," said Ken Ripper. "You slay me. Well, here's plenty of space and a roaring ship."

"And an ivory moon to land on," finished James, toasting the company. "But how many goldarned ivory moons you want, skipper? Isn't this one enough?"

"Look at the visograf," said Jz, his voice calm but penetrating. "Over to the left. See it?"

"It's a wind," said James. "One of those little whirlwinds that scatters leaves and dirt... if there were any leaves to scatter here."

"That's right," agreed Worthington. "No leaves, unfortunately, so the poor thing just swirls up the dust. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Marshok knows what it is," said Jz. "Tell 'em, little chap."

"That's an elemental," said the Vernalucillian.

They sprang to their feet and Ripper said, "I can't see anything but dust!"

"Patience," said the tiny man. "A bit of patience, captain. Now do you catch the outline?"

"Good merciful powers," said James wheezily. "I do."

It was tall, taller than Ken Ripper, and milky; evanescent, coming and going as though through an unknown dimension; it had no tentacles or pseudopodia, no arms or legs, no head, no projections of any kind; it was just there, a tall formless mist, speaking somehow to their minds of frightful malevolence. It was as though the temperature in the lounge had dropped twenty degrees, and they all shuddered uncontrollably.

"It's felt the force field," whis-

pered Worthington. The figure of mist, rooted in the swirling moon dust, had checked and drawn back.

"Now it's coming again."

"It feels it, it feels it!"

"It can't take it, Ken! It's leaving!"

"It will be back," said Marshok firmly.

WHEN IT returned it had gathered reinforcements, and many of the uncanny things converged on the *Meteor Twelve*. Most of the crew had remained in the lounge, although a few were at the atomic force field controls, feeling that they might be needed there. The elementals swept slowly up to the limits of the field and halted.

"Now what, I wonder?" murmured Ken Ripper.

"They will break it," predicted the Vernalucillian. "They are pure force themselves, so how should a field of force halt them for long?"

"You sure look on the gloomy side of things," said James. "Captain, providing we can fight off these brutes, how long do you give us before food and air run out?"

"Ten years," said Ripper absently.

"Ten years sealed in this shell on an airless moon..."

"Yes. I'd just as soon die fighting, too," said the senior pilot.

"How about rigging up some sort of emergency power plant to get us back to Terra—or rather to Randarsflite? The atom ports—"

"Are too specialized to be of any help, even if we could divert their energy from the very necessary force field. And we haven't another source of energy strong enough to lift us twenty feet off Jedar's surface, much less blast us back across all those millions of miles... What are they doing out there?"

"Tunneling," said Marshok simply.

"Tunneling? In what?"

"In our force field."

"But that's impossible!"

"It's impossible for a bumblebee to fly," said Worthington, "but he does it. Look at those illegitimate sons of unwed mamas come!"

"Allah akbar," exclaimed the Jovian Ratharl, who years before had been converted to Islam by a Moslem jetman. "What a sight!"

The tall shapeless mist-things, leaning together like ghostly pillows in a high wind, were pressing themselves against one spot in the invisible force field, which seemed to be weakening under the strain. The leader crept a little way forward, halted, crept a little further.

"Concentrate the field on 'em, you eggheaded lummoxes!" roared Ken Ripper into the intercom; and the cool voice of square-faced Jz answered him: "We have been for five minutes, captain. Any more brilliant orders?"

"Carry on," said Ripper. "Do the best you can, Jz."

"Okay, skipper," said the Martian. "But I wish I had me a nice—hey!" he broke off, then said, "You see that?"

The elementals had surged in a sudden wave to the very wall of the ship.

"Merciful gods of the galaxies," whispered Ken Ripper, his dark eyes glued to the screen. "Keep those brutes back. Get back there, you devils! Back, you spawn of the Vernaluc Hades! Back, you—"

He realized he was shouting, stopped, a little shamefaced, and then heard the babble as a score of other voices took it up.

"Get back, you monstrosities, you vermin of the wastelands, you hell-hags, you harpies, you bloomin' goblins," chanted the crew, each man

swearing and sweating as he strained his body forward at the screen. Names in a dozen tongues and out of a hundred mythologies rattled off the visograf. Helpless, trapped in their ship without power to fight, to flee, or to do anything save only to tongue-lash the enemy blue, they had all yielded to the impulse suggested by their chief's outbreak; if they could do nothing else, they could tell these wraithy beings what they thought of them!

And suddenly the whole squad of elementals drew away from the *Meteor Twelve*, back beyond the reach of the atomic force field, and stood wavering together in a group, half-seen, half-suggested, the moon dust of Jedar whipping up from their bases like the sands of a wind-disturbed desert.

"What happened?" asked James blankly. "They'd broken through the field."

"Not quite, son," said Ken Ripper. "It's strongest at the atom ports. I guess they couldn't take it there."

"No," said Worthington, "I don't think you're right. That final surge of theirs—they'd found the right formula, or combination, or whatever you want to call it, with which to beat down our field. Then they just seemed to be flung back. I don't understand, but I'll lay you an ape to an emerald that something else stopped 'em."

"The hull?" asked James.

"The hull, haha," said Worthington scornfully. "The hull of this tub wouldn't halt two tough termites if they set their hearts on getting in."

"One termite," said Jz over the intercom. "One old termite without any teeth."

"They've gone," said the senior pilot. The visograf showed a blank undisturbed landscape. "And I'm tired," he went on, yawning in spite

of himself. "What about a nap, you fellows? We've got ten years to figure out what beat back those critters."

"Or ten minutes," said Jz hollowly from his post at the atom port controls.

"The voice of doom," said Worthington. "All right, you four-eyed Cassandra, you can watch for 'em. I'm going to sleep."

**L**EAVING A skeleton crew to scan the visograf, Ken Ripper and his lieutenants sought slumber that perversely would not come. They tossed and turned on their synthedown beds, covertly watched each other, then sat up as one and dangled their legs above the floor, grinning.

"Well, sons, what did it?"

"I have an idea," said James.

"Me too. What's yours?"

"Force, pitted against force."

"Intangible force against ineluctable force, eh?"

"Ineluctable, chief, means irresistible; and their force was resisted."

"That's right, skipper. Choose your words a little more carefully when you're tellin' us things. We have impressionable minds."

"Always the video yak-yak boys," said Ken Ripper. "Well, what was our force?"

The three pilots looked at one another, and their gaze was solemn now, and full of something which in less space-hardened men might have been awe.

"Force of mind," said Worthington a little breathlessly.

"Exactly," said the senior pilot. "Combined force of mind."

"And I've been thinking," went on Worthington, "that it's because we're what we are, that it worked."

"What are we?" asked James.

"Why, you sun-fogged ninny,

we're the crew of the *Meteor Twelve*! We're one soul in twenty-seven bodies, not countin' Marshok, who's along for the ride. We, my poor nitwit, we are the crew of the *Meteor Twelve*, exploratory rocket of the Outer Dark Line, and we think as one man—by glory, the old musketeer slogan fits us better than it ever fitted any pack of adventurers before! 'One for all, and all for one!'"

"I believe," said Ken Ripper, that in your feeble, halting fashion you have uncovered a profound truth."

"Who's a yak-yak boy now?" asked Worthington triumphantly, and received a soft fat pillow in his gloating face. "Mphm," he said, "that's not fair. I wasn't looking."

"Shut your growling," said the captain. "In your youth and inexperience, m'boys, you've thought one step in the right direction and given up. On the other hand, I have gone on before you to a conclusion that's so blindingly lovely, so superbly right, that I—"

"That you've gotten hysterical," said James. "We know, we can see. You're aflame with your own brilliance. Tell us, skipper."

"No," said Ken Ripper, giving one great bound across the room leapfrogging over the astonished Worthington and slamming open the intercom. "No, I'll show you. Ahoy, you sleeping uglies," he bellowed into the mike, "rise and shine. Shine, especially, in the lounge. Work to do, lads! Man's work!" Singing a snatch of vulgar song, he came back to his bed and began to drag on his uniform. James and Worthington followed suit, staring at their jovial leader with up-lifted brows.

"Any sign of the elementals, Jz?" asked the chief as men filed rapidly into the big lounge. The square-faced Martian shook his head.

"No, not a swirl of dust to be seen."

"That's too bad," said Ken Ripper, half to himself. "However, it gives me time to pass out instructions. Listen...."

"IT'S FANTASTIC," said Marshok flatly. "It's an insane idea, and there isn't a single thing to prove its truth, or recommend it—and I'm with you heart and soul."

"Thanks, peewee," said James, but I doubt if you'll be much good to us in this deal."

"Why?"

"You're not in tune with us," said Ken Ripper gently. "You see, we're not merely a gang of Terrestrians and Martians and Jovians and Saturnians; we're the crew of the *Meteor Twelve*. We've been together quite a while—none of us less than three years, and a lot of us more than twenty. Smokey, for instance, has been with me forty-eight years come Martian New Year. And we've got into the habit of thinking alike, all of us, so that there's never a situation arises but what at least half of us get the same idea about it at the same time. Our combined thought waves are what blasted back the elementals, I'm sure. The proof of it is that fourteen of us had that idea simultaneously. Well, if our minds produce a force that can control even one of your Jedarian elementals, to the extent of shoving him back from a thing he wants to enter in the worst way, then—"

"Then your plan may indeed work," said Marshok, "and I am, as you imply, a mere eighth tube on a seven-jet job. I shall be a spectator, then, and take notes on my cuff." he smiled at the skipper.

"And if it doesn't work—" began Jz.

"Then we go out in one crash of

sound and fury, as every spaceman should wish to do," said the candescentsman stiffly. "What's wrong with you, Jz?"

"I was about to end my sentence the same way you did," replied Jz. "Sparky, you're as impetuous as a Venusian comfort-woman. Sizzle down."

"Anyone want any gin?" asked Ken Ripper.

Nobody spoke. "Might be the last glass," said James. Still they said nothing. Ken Ripper nodded.

"All right, we'll do it cold sober. And in a couple of minutes, too, unless I'm growing blind, because there's an elemental."

"Alone?"

"Seems to be."

"He's nearly to the force field. Shall I pass the word to turn it off?" "No, he'd be suspicious. He knows the trick of nullifying it, so let him come in as he did before."

The single half-seen monster came drifting up, with its attendant whirlpool of moon dust, hesitated an instant at the field, then forged through to the wall of the ship. The senior pilot, feeling the tenseness in the lounge, said, "Easy, boys, easy."

The elemental appeared to fiddle with the flush door nearest it. Ken Ripper said to the intercom mike, "Release number two portside hatch."

The elemental drifted back a foot or two as the hatch swung open before it; then it rallied and coming up, entered the airlock. The door swung shut behind it.

"Step one," said the captain. "Switch the visograf—thanks." They could see the elemental moving about within the decompression chamber. "Now let's see how he likes air. Flood number two airlock."

Nothing happened.

"He doesn't even deign to notice

the change." Ken Ripper grinned lopsidedly. "Good deal, lads."

"That means—"

"Precisely. The plan may work. Well, now's as good a time as any to fire the startin' gun. Let it in."

The second door slid open before the alien creature and it hovered through, its incredible misty outlines indistinct against the new background of chrome, silver, ebony, and Martian oak.

"Get up here fast," snapped the senior pilot. "On the triple, you guys!"

**THEY WATCHED** it as it drifted from room to room, testing here an instrument and there an article of furniture, passing on to fresh finds. The few crewmen who had been at the airlock controls came running into the lounge. James counted noses.

"All ready, chief." There was no joking now, no winking and jesting at death. The struggle was almost upon them, such a fight as none of them had ever known; and even spacemen must be serious when they approach something so unthinkable new and terrible that it staggers the senses...

"It's in the auxiliary power room. Wonder what it makes of the last of our fuel?"

"Here it comes up the corridor."

"It's just outside."

"Okay," snapped Ken Ripper, "you all know what to do. Switch those visografts to the outside again. Good. Now start thinking."

As one the twenty-seven crewmen of *Meteor Twelve* began to concentrate their thought waves upon this fantastic demon-thing, the elemental of Jedar; and as it came through the door into the big lounge they saw it waver, halt indecisively, then begin to move slowly backwards.

"Hold it there!" yelled Ripper.

"Don't let it budge!"

The elemental stood as though its base were nailed to the floor, shaking like an aspen of Terra, pulsing furiously with a milky light. The men of the rocket, the brothers of the spaceways, forced their wills out against the thing, and it waved and shook and beat at this new force, and could not move from the spot!

"To the auxiliary power room, skipper?" asked James huskily.

"Not yet. We've got to see how few of us can control this devil. You Jovians stop thinking at it. Think about—think about a tall foaming glass of zorhal, and a lovely red lady of Jupiter."

There was no appreciable lessening of the invisible bonds that held the elemental.

"Great...now the other extraterrestrians. Everybody stop thinking at it but the earthmen."

Still the thrashing thing could not move!

"Seventeen of us can handle it, then!" exulted Ken Ripper. "Okay, everybody except those who served with me in the *Comet Sixty-Eight* stop thinking. Brood on a glass of beer."

"He thinks we're a bunch of old sots," whispered James to Worthington. "Not saying he's wrong, though."

The elemental stood still, then gave a mighty heave. But it was stopped as by a wall of plastiglass. It could not retreat, nor could it attack these loathed interlopers. Four men gripped in with the tentacles of their thoughts and would not permit it to move. Four men!

"That's nine-tenths of the battle," said Ken Ripper, and a blithe smile touched his lips.

"Optimistic," growled Jz. "But it's a good half, anyhow."

"Nine-tenths, nine-tenths," insisted

the captain. "Now for the auxiliary power room, fellows. Make it move. Force it down the corridor, you brainy wonders! Slam it along, you mental wizards! Everybody!"

THE ELEMENTAL, an almost solid column of whitish vapor now as its ire boiled and bubbled within its eerie form, swept slowly backward and drifted grudgingly along the hall toward the power room.

As the last few men left the lounge, following the captive elemental, one of them glanced at the linked visographs. Then he shouted.

"Jackrabbits of Jerusalem! There's a million more comin'!"

The moon dust was raising in great obscuring clouds as a multitude of elementals converged on the *Meteor Twelve*. Ken Ripper, dashing back for a quick look, groaned.

"Listen, *kanlores!*" he roared. "All of you but Jz, James, Worthington, Smokey, Ratharl and Marshshok come back here!" They came piling in from the corridor, and Ripper told them in a bull's bellow: "Think at those fiends, all of you! Think that they can't get in—think that they're powerless against the musketeers of the Solar system! Think till your eyes pop out, lads, but *think!*" Then he was gone, following the handful of his lieutenants who still held the elemental in check and forced it foot by foot along the hall.

The crew crowded about the visographs, encircling one another's shoulders with their arms, drawing together in comradeship and mutual need; one by one they squinted at the images of that horrific throng outside, and drew down their brows, and feeling their palms begin to sweat and their nerves to tauten and sing, they thought...

Down in the auxiliary power room

the mind-chained elemental heaved its intangible bulk at Ripper and his half-dozen aids. It could not touch them. Its terrible power, which had never been withstood, now thrashed helpless in the narrow shaft of space allowed it by the opposing force, a force as great as any in the universe: the combined wills of seven determined men.

Even the tiny foot-tall Vernalucillian was helping, directing his thoughts at the enemy.

"Marshok," said Ken Ripper, "open the fuel tube."

He leaped and tugged hard, his delicate hands reddening on the wheel that was geared to be operated by a two-hundred-pound man. Ripper grated, "Heave, little one! I can't spare a man from this critter—it's getting stronger!" The elemental seemed to gain strength from its fellows without. Ripper did not dare to turn his thoughts for more than a second or two from the task of holding it still. Even as he had spoken to Marshok it had managed to lunge a few inches at him.

Marshok set his teeth, clung to the wheel, hauled and jerked and dragged at it. The *Meteor Twelve* was shaking now, as the wrath of the elementals of Jedar gripped it and rocked it back and forth. Marshok's dainty fingers began to split at the tips. Blood ran down his wrists in scarlet streams. He shut his eyes and heaved once more. The great wheel grunted and turned over, and the fuel tube swung open, its interior black and silent, drained of the atomic jet-liquid it had once contained.

"Good boy," said Ripper. "Good, good boy. You'll get a decoration for this. Whoa! Hold him! Now, into the tube!"

The elemental wavered, then gradually sifted over and vanished into the

long darkened space like a puff of smoke drawn into an air vent.

"Slam it shut. Don't stop thinking at it, though!" warned the senior pilot. Jz sighed gustily, and his square face dripped perspiration; Smokey the Saturnian was all but evaporated with effort. Even James, ox of a man though he was, could feel the cords of his neck standing out with the strain.

THE SPACESHIP was thundering and booming under the angry attack of the horde of elementals. Even so the skipper found time to clap each lieutenant on the back and murmur a word of thanks and encouragement before he left them to dash up the corridor and into the lounge.

"All right, he's in! To your posts, all of you—think as much as you can at these demons, but get her up—*get her up!*"

The crew scattered, were gone. Marshok and Ken Ripper were left alone before the visographs.

"They'll smash the hull," said the blood-stained Vernalucillian wearily. His face was ash-gray. "They'll get in now, sir."

"Not while I'm alive," said Ken Ripper.

He grasped the table before him with both hands. His face was suffused to a crimson color, his neck was a column of steel fluted with tense muscles; his whole strong body strained at his mind, and his thoughts poured out at the alien pack of elementals like vitriol.

"Damn you," he said in his mind. "All the gods of all the galaxies curse you to all their private hells. Back, you fiends of the pit. Back, you bloodsuckers! Back, you cacodemons! Get back, you bugaboos, you clutching things of evil! Leave my ship alone. We're men here, you curs of space, you bullies, you hoodlums, you



gangsters, you rabble scum of Jedar. We're *men*, and men were never born to crawl to you, you—" He switched to Martian, which has many more terms of disdain than Terrestrial. Sweat, salt and bitter, ran into his open mouth and along his tongue. His eyes grew hot and protruded from their sockets. Trickle of blood came out of his nose and his ears. Dimly he could feel tiny nerves snap here and there in his limbs, leaving trails of fiery pain behind them. Still he concentrated on the elemental mob, and saw that they could no longer touch the silver hull of *Meteor Twelve*, although their anger still rocked it as with great blasts of wind. He was winning.

How long he stood there he never knew.

When the rocket lifted from the moon he did not realize for a moment what had happened, and thought that the elementals had broken in, for they vanished from the visografts like mist from a sheet of steel; then Marshok said gently, "You've won, captain," and he staggered back, his big hands cramped into arcs of pure torment, and sat down hard on a chair.

"It worked, then, little man," he said. His voice was a ghost of itself.

"I never thought it would," said Marshok.

"You helped...we couldn't have done it if you hadn't been there at the locks of the fuel tube." Speech was an effort that wracked him unbearably, but there were things to be said. The lounge was filling with his crew. "Relieve the men in the power room. Remember—" for a space he could not think what it was they must remember; then, "remember, we've got to think at that thing, in relays, all the way to Randarsflite. Then we can bring it back in another ship and drop it on Jedar. Go on, for God's sake,"

he tried to shout at them. "Go on and relieve those poor guys, can't you?"

THEY RAN, a dozen of them, to escape the quick fury of his broken body. Then he went on speaking to Marshok.

"You helped even though you thought it was useless. There's a lot of guts in that little carcass, son."

"Thank you," said the Vernalucilian. He was bandaging his shattered fingers one by one. "Thank you very much," he repeated quietly.

"You all did splendidly," said the captain. He shut his eyes and took a tremendous gulp of the liquor-mix that someone held to his lips. "Whoo, don't take that away," he said. Then, "How's the girl doing?"

"Flight's erratic," said Ratharl at his elbow, "but they're getting it under control. This is a type of power we—ah, we aren't really used to as yet."

"Understatement of the decade," murmured Ripper. He forced his still-curved fingers up to open his eyes, for the muscles of his face seemed asleep. "Well, that's that. Don't forget the relays. We've got to control our new jet power."

"I don't see how the blazes you knew it would get us aloft," said James.

"Logic, Junior, logic pure and, if you'll forgive me, simple. Anything that's a compound of pure force will run a ship. Elementals are sheer force, according to Marshok. Ergo, they'll run a spaceship if you apply the right power to 'em. The crew did, using the living elemental as though it were nothing but a concentrate of atomic energy. Thus the *Meteor Twelve* arose, and laughed, and headed home. Q.E.D."

"But the force of thought controlled the elementals. Why couldn't we mere-

ly have thought the ship back to Randarsflite?"

Ken Ripper allowed his tormented eyelids to close. His body felt as though it would never be comfortable again.

"Listen," he said, "if I knew everything I'd be the Great Eel of Venus, not captain of a dinky little space bum full of nitwits and fatheads. The force of thought, as I see it, is intangible power. Elementals are composed of tangible energy. Tangibility is an essential of fuel. Elementals, therefore, are acceptable as fuel. That was easy to figure out. But just why thought could act on *them*, I don't know. Unless it's because they're more than energy: they're partially sentient beings, too. I suppose that's it. If they were absolutely pure force they'd be entirely invisible, and thought wouldn't affect 'em: Lord, Lord, I'm bone weary. I guess you'll have to carry me to bed, gentlemen. I can't seem to stand up. All this the-

orizing has worn me out...."

They picked up their unconscious captain, a score of tender hands lifting him from the chair, and bore him off to bathe him and stow him in bed; and Jz the Martian wiped his square brow and said, "Worthington, as soon as we're in range, get on spaceradio and tell Randarsflite to have a lot of hefty thinkers gathered together by the time we make port. That raving beast in the fuel tube will take some handling even after we've spent the next two months using him up bit by bit. And tell 'em to have twenty-seven big beds ready for the tired, tired crew of the *Meteor Twelve*." He paused and looked at Marshok, the little Vernalucillian who had spoilt his hands in helping them.

"Make that twenty-eight," he said. He put his arm across the shoulders of Marshok. "Twenty-eight beds for the full gallant crew of the *Meteor Twelve*."

THE END

## THE MONSTERS



By Leslie Phelps



THE STORY never has been fully released. Rumors began coming out of various Japanese sources as far back as nineteen fifty-five and now, three years later, it can be said pretty definitely, that the worst is over and the Monsters have been destroyed.

Directly under the atomic bomb blast which so severely laced the city of Hiroshima during the Second World War, was located a small jail housing some seventy prisoners, most of whom had been imprisoned for capital crimes and who were awaiting trial.

They were not killed by the bomb blast but most suffered severe radiation burns and were sent to various prison hospitals in near-by prefectures. No one noticed that more than half these men escaped in the next three years. True, their escape was noticed and they were hunted, but no connection was noted between their being Hiroshimans and escapees.

In 'fifty-four the rumors began. Horri-

bly mutilated bodies, criminal acts of terrible ferocity, stories of "hideous monsters" who terrified their victims, were rife. Eventually government and semi-military agencies were set to track down both the sources of the rumors and the so-called "monsters."

They succeeded. It was a long and slow task, and many more crimes were committed before they were completely obliterated. It was learned that the radiation blasts had done two things. First, most of the prisoners were effectively physical "mutants" distorted and warped beyond belief, scarred with burn-tissue and ugly as sin. Secondly, the radiation blasts had changed their powerful criminal mentalities.

Yes, it has been found through these experiences that radiations will stimulate or induce activity in those minds susceptible to criminal urges. The strategists and technicians who plan on conducting defense measures against this powerful weapon must now take into account this new source of danger.

# BEST-DRESSED MAN-1980



By William Karney



"MY HUSBAND is looking for a new suit," Mary Brady said to the stand-offish-looking clerk. He looked even paler under the powerful fluorescents of the ultra-modern glass, ceramic and stellite store.

"Of course, Madam," the clerk said, casting a disdainful look toward Jim Brady's rather beat-up coveralls. "Just what did you have in mind?"

"What do you think, Jim?" Mary asked turning toward her husband. "After all, you're wearing it."

Like male shoppers everywhere and at all times, Jim had little real idea of what he wanted. Which was why Mary was along. "I'm going along this time," Mary had insisted. "You've been given the business too often."

"Well, why not something like I'm wearing?" Jim asked sheepishly. "I like the coverall style—and it's practical."

"We have some very fine adaptations of that," the clerk said with a faint smile. "You'll want the heated type of course?"

"I hadn't thought about it," Jim replied.

"Is it much more expensive?"

"Not now," the clerk answered quickly. "They're making thermoplex on a large scale. Anyone can afford it." The "anyone" was said pointedly.

"Let us see some," Mary said.

Seven suits and forty minutes later, Jim Brady with Mary at his side, left the store. He looked like any man who is wearing a new suit. The thermoplex was a bit stiff and it would take time to settle to his dimensions, but Jim had to admit it was comfortable. He touched the stud at the belt and felt the aura of warmth creep over him. It felt good, he had to admit.

"That's a lovely suit," Mary said feelingly. "I'm glad we got it. I think I'll wear it on the cold winter mornings while you wear your old one."

"Oh no you don't," Jim returned. "This suit is mine. If you want a built-in heater get yourself a new dress next week."

"May I? Oh, thanks, Jim..."

And all the while she knew it would end that way...



## "PI-ROMANIACS"



By Charles Recour



THERE'S SOMETHING a little disconcerting and weird about mathematics, especially to the struggling student. And nowhere is this better demonstrated than by the most peculiar of irrational, transcendental numbers, that elusive and mysterious devil known as "pi". An innocent Greek letter symbolizes it, and a simple non-terminating decimal represents it, "pi—3.14159..."

We know that such a number cannot be represented by a finite number of digits, but it can be calculated as far as is necessary for any given purpose. Thus the engineer rarely uses it to more than five decimal places and even the most nebulous and theoretical of scientists, the astronomer, has no use for more than eight or ten decimal places.

But some people are born curious—or nuts. Back in the middle of the Nineteenth century an English mathematician by the name of William Shanks decided to do the job once and for all. A German mathematician had calculated pi to around four hundred decimal places and as a result the Germans called pi "the Ludolphschen" number in his honor. Shanks really went to town. He worked pi out to

seven hundred and seven decimal places!

This is the record and no one has bothered to go higher. Actually there is not a bit of sense in carrying the thing beyond ten places or so we've said. But we mustn't forget the comedians!

It seems that at one of the government ballistics laboratories they've got an automatic computing machine, a "mechanical brain". This was too much for the operators. Evidently there was a spare moment or so in the use of the machine so the boys decided to cut up a bit. They went to work on the feeders, set the dials and let her roll. Nineteen thousand vacuum tubes went into operation, relays clicked and pounded, instruments went to town!

Some twenty odd hours later, the beaten and sweating machine coughed up its answer weakly, rolled over and went back for a well-earned rest. And there on the tape, coded, but legible was good old pi, this time really wrapped up and captured down to the end of the universe! Pi came out in two thousand and forty decimals!

There'll be no use for pi to this extreme accuracy, but at least the lads have set a record—of sorts. Anybody want some more pi?



# **VANGUARD of the LOST**

*by*  
**John D. MacDonald**

**Alien ships landing on Earth could mean but one thing: invasion. But as men watched in fear, a strange thing happened**

**A** FEW HUNDRED thousand people in New York saw the early video-news and thus immediately set themselves up as experts, having seen the New Delhi shots of the vast, hoary, slab-sided ships that floated like so many ridiculous balloons over the brown circus-ground land-

scape of India.

The early editions carried the telephotos and the newspapers were not at all reticent in their surmises. NEW RUSSIAN WEAPON said one. INVADERS FROM SPACE said another. MARTIANS ARRIVE, screamed the News.

It was a situation so altogether trite to the vast international clique of science fiction fandom, remembered from the opening paragraphs of half a thousand stories, that it gave most of them the feeling that they were reliving a dream.

And it gave fandom a chance to check reality against the surmises of the unhappy writers who had been forced to proceed entirely on assumptions.

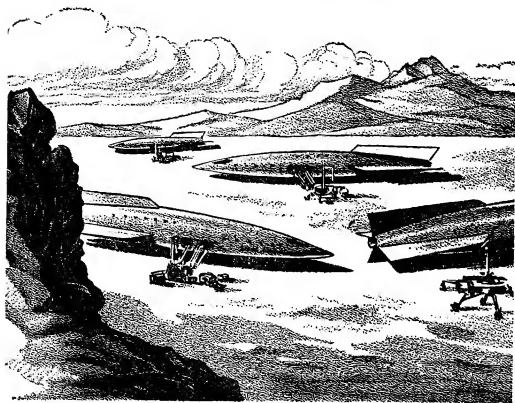
But this was reality. Even as the atomic bomb had outlawed cataclysm in science fiction, this invasion from space threatened the demise of the space opera, since the more accurately fantasy anticipates actuality, the more carefully it signs its eventual death warrant.

Larry Graim, disconsolate statistician by day, avid author of science

fiction by night, read the headlines, hit himself smartly in the forehead several times with the heel of his hand to make certain he was awake, and phoned news of a headache to his office. This was too great a day to be wasted in computing mean and median relationships.

Estimates of the number of ships varied wildly. With shoes not yet laced, Graim trotted down to the corner, took back editions of all the papers to his furnished room on Eighty-ninth Street.

The lowest estimate he read said seven hundred ships. He swallowed hard. In his epics there had only been three or at the most five ships from space. He felt better when he turned on the radio and heard that emergency meetings were being called involving the heads of governments. That, at



Machines were at work down there, they saw. Machines pouring from the huge space ships . . .

least, followed his story lines.

Late bulletins reported small groups of the ships over the West Coast, over Europe, over South Africa, even over Australia. They traveled at an average height of three thousand feet. They were expected over New York in a matter of hours, or maybe minutes.

Graim lifted the pot off the electric coil, poured himself another cup of coffee. Then he thought of the roof. Forgetting the coffee he left his room, ran up the stairs and came out onto the flat roof of the five story building. The morning haze was lifting, was drifting east out to sea.

**A**FTER SEARCHING every inch of the sky, taut with anticipation, seeing nothing, he looked around him. A dozen feet away a girl stood, looking at him with amusement. He had seen her many times on the stairs, had wondered and wondered how he could skillfully open a conversation with her. The heroes of his stories were always adequate for such situations. They were suave and worldly. Their conversations were sparkling and urbane.

"Uh...hello," said Larry Graim.

"Hello yourself. Looking for Martians?" Her voice was low, warm, full of that secret amusement. The morning wind blew a strand of dark hair across her forehead. He wondered why he hadn't made the heroines of his stories look like her. Or maybe he had. He grew conscious of his unlaced shoes, uncombed hair, unshaven jaw and shirt with button missing.

"They won't be Martians," he said firmly.

She raised one eyebrow. "Oh? Secret sources of information?"

"Martians are old hat. Canals are optical illusions."

She laughed. "You'd better tell all these others. They're looking for Martians." She waved a hand lightly at

the other roofs. Hundreds of people watched the sky.

He was suddenly annoyed with her attitude. "Don't you know, young woman, that this may be the most important event in recorded history?"

"Of course! That's why I want to see it. That's why I'm taking the day off. And don't call me young woman. My name is Alice Fiddler."

"Larry Graim," he said weakly. The faint flick of her anger had stung.

She frowned. "Graim. Graim. Oh, of course! Sideways in Space. Loom of Lural. Jenyeb, the Elder."

And light dawned for him. "Alice Fiddler! You write...those letters! Those ghastly letters!"

"Of course. And I pan you, Graim, every chance I get. I'm the one who called you the poor man's Kuttner and the cretin's Van Vogt."

He forgot the very attractive package the letter writer came in. He moved to within three feet of her, fists clenched and said, "I promised myself that if I ever met up with you I'd..."

She smiled warmly up at him. "You'd what, little man? Lay one of those lean brown paws on me and I'll toss you off the roof. I couldn't render a better service to my fellow readers."

"Even Bradbury couldn't make a heroine out of you!"

"And they pay you two cents a word! Imagine, I've seen better words written on fences."

He heard distant shouts from the other roofs and a flick of movement half seen made him turn his head and look toward the west.

He saw them. His lean jaw sagged and his eyes bulged glassily. He made a wet sound, deep in the throat.

"See!" Alice Fiddler said. "See! Shiny and symmetric space ships! Indeed, Mr. Graim. Roaring jets! Indeed!"

He continued to gawp. There were nine of them and they were not in formation. They came blundering up from the horizon with same splendid disregard for order as brown cows drifting across a pasture. They were not shiny. They were made of a rough mottled dirty-looking substance. Jets did not roar. They wavered stubbornly and silently along, like escapees from Macy's Christmas parade. And they were not symmetric. They were shaped as though a not-quite-bright child had labored to form vast fat cigars out of mud. Lumpy protuberances, like mammoth warts, protruded from their sides.

Yet certain things about them did impress him. Their speed was considerable, in spite of the yawing movements they made. And they gave the impression of enormous weight and incalculable age. There was a loose discipline about their movement.

**THEY** CAME abreast, about a mile between each one, went on out to sea, wheeled back and, once again over land, went blundering on up the coast. "What next, genius?" Alice Fiddler asked.

Graim straightened. At least he was certain of his ground there. He knew how the plot would unfold. "Attempts will be made to communicate with them. Those attempts will be continued until they make some overt move, cause some damage. And then the airforce will attack. And, of course, all of our weapons will be powerless. But some young inventor will be working on something which, in the nick of time will drive them away."

She clapped her hands. "Bravo! What'll we name this yarn from the immortal pen of Lawrence Graim? Sideways in Space? You wrote that one already. Remember?"

"Oh, hush!" he said wearily. "Come on down and have some coffee and

we'll listen to the radio."

She rested her hand on his arm for a moment. "Cheer up, Graim. After this you'll have to find a new plot. I'm not as rough as I sound. Where's your coffee?"

In his room they sat and listened to the excited tenor yelpings of the news analyst. "At this moment it has been decided that the space ships did not originate anywhere on this planet. No one knows where they came from or what they want. Folks, they seem to be looking us over. All continents at once. A complete census is difficult because they all look alike and they stay in motion. But it is estimated that there are somewhere between two and three thousand of them, each one a good quarter mile long. Imagine that, folks! An airship or space ship or whatever about thirteen hundred feet long! There doesn't seem to be any pattern in their movements. They stay at about three thousand feet and keep moving around in groups. We are awaiting a statement from the president. Ah, here it is. And I quote. 'There is no cause for panic or alarm. Some intelligence is behind all this, and if they were unfriendly, we'd have known it by now. We are trying to communicate with them. The American public will be kept advised of our progress.'"

Alice Fiddler walked over and twisted the dial to turn the set off. "We know as much as they do, Graim. Good coffee, this."

"This is a moment of enormous consequence. You can't turn off our source of information like that and drink coffee. It isn't part of the story line."

"With a little practise, Graim, you could bore me good. Now hush up and have some more coffee. I'll turn it back on to junior in a little while."

"A story has to keep moving," he said.

"But lambie, this isn't a story! This is it."

He looked at her. She sat comfortably in his best chair, one leg tucked under her. She looked at him over the rim of the cup and winked. He blushed.

"Shy, eh?" she said.

"Nobody would ever accuse you of that, Miss Fiddler."

"For goodness sake, Graim, stop being stuffy. Apparently you took the day off too. Truce. What do you say?"

He grinned at her. "Truce Alice."

"That's better. You look almost human now. Go comb you hair and shave. When you get through we'll see what's new."

As he looked at his long, sober face in the mirror, as he hacked at the beard, he tried vainly to disassociate himself with the fictions he had written and the reality of the present. It was useless. He had lived for so long in so many dream worlds of fantasy that he could not look on reality except as another figment of fantasy, another story line to be plotted to a happy conclusion.

"That's better," she said as he came back into the room. "Now we'll see." She turned on the radio and they soon had two new facts. One, that another ship, similar to the others, but enormously larger, was in orbit around the earth at the equator at an estimated height of three hundred miles. Two, that the smaller ships were conscientiously covering every kilometer of the land surface of the earth.

"Mapping," he said.

She frowned. "For the first time, you make sense, Larry. Constant speed, constant height. All the land surface. For what?"

"Exploration party?"

"No. Too many of them."

"Colonization?"

They stared at each other and the first cool touch of fear was on them. She lowered her voice as she said, "I

hope not. I have a hunch that would be a bad, bad thing."

THEY HAD lunch together in a white enamel restaurant on the corner. She insisted on paying for her own. At three o'clock in the afternoon there was more news. The ships all stopped where they were. A survey indicated that there was no town or hamlet, however small, over which the ships had not been seen. Technicians, searching the air waves had found that one end of the band was blanketed with shrill high screams. They had recorded these screams, slowed them down, found that they were signals, some sort of a communication code. The best linguists and code men had been assigned to work on the problem. But there was little hope of it being broken. One expert stated that, from the general structure of the code signals he was willing to venture a guess that it concerned mathematical measurements, but having no knowledge of the mathematical structure being used, he failed to see how it could be broken down.

Alice said, "Brother! It sounds like a Graim epic. But where's the fearless hero who cracks both code and invader?"

"I thought we said truce," Larry grumbled.

They listened to the news cast. No ships could be seen from metropolitan New York. The other ships were stationary. Two news services were broadcasting from aircraft circling the silent ships.

Alice changed to another program. An excited voice said, "This is Mal McKay, folks. It's a bright sunny afternoon up here at three thousand feet. Our copter is hovering over one of these monsters from space. It looks like the back of some huge prehistoric beast. I've given the pilot the word, folks. We're settling toward it. Closer,



closer. We've landed! You of the radio audience can no longer hear our motors. Folks, it's quiet up here, what I mean quiet. And we'll have to get a new word to indicate how still and motionless this space ship is. It is as though it were welded to a big pole that extends down to the center of the earth. I'll have to admit that it gives me the shakes, folks. You can probably hear it in my voice."

"The darn fool!" Alice muttered. She scowled.

The bright, eager voice continued. "Now for the hide of this beast, folks. It seems to be metallic and yet it has the look of old rock. It seems corroded. I stamp my heel and it's like stamping on a boulder. Now I'm touching it with my hand. There is a bit of warmth to it, but no more than you'd expect as the results of this late afternoon sunshine. I can see the other ships to the north and to the west. They're just as steady and inert as this one. When we came up we saw the thin lines against the sides of the beast indicating doors or ports or whatever. There's something or somebody inside this thing I'm standing on, folks, and it would be interesting to know what it or they are, hey? I have a stethoscope with me. You know, one of those things the doc checks your heart with? There'll be a few moments of air silence while I listen through the hide of this monster."

"He'll be giving it a nickname," Graim said with disgust.

"The human race," Alice said, "is a big puppy that goes charging and yapping and wagging its tail at everything new."

There was new excitement in the announcer's voice. "Well, I've heard it or them. Sounds like a busy office. A bunch of clickings down in there. Click, clack, click, clack. And that's all."

"Relays," Graim said. "Why

couldn't they have put a scientist on top of that thing instead of a human airdale?"

"Now, folks, I am taking out of my pocket a Willow's file. You've heard of Willow's files. 'Sharpest steel teeth in the world.' With this file I am going to scrape off a sample of the hide of this thing from space. There is a little flaked bit here sticking up, like an enormous pock mark, as though something hit it a blow and bounced off after damaging the hide. Listen and you'll hear me filing on it."

OVER THE radio came a tiny grating sound. It continued on and on. Then it stopped. The announcer laughed nervously. "Well, I guess that the sharpest steel teeth in the world aren't quite sharp enough for this baby. I seem to be wearing the teeth off the file and I haven't even made a mark on the thin edge I was sawing on. I see by my Sweetening Watch—time when you need it—that my air time is running out. This is Mal McKay, folks, your things-of-the-day reporter, signing off from a brand new spot, the top of one of the spaceships near Cleveland. Until this same time tomorrow..."

The network cut in with station identification and a spot commercial. This time Graim switched off the set.

He clenched his fists and glared down at the rug. "No dignity," he muttered. "No respect. No awe. Just as if those ships were two-headed calves in a sideshow."

"But don't you see?" Alice said. "That's been the trouble with your stories. Your people in fiction have been loaded with awe and respect and dignity. And so they weren't people. They are all little cardboard annies that you yank around with strings."

He looked at her bleakly. "There are supposed to be riots tonight. Fear all over the world. Sidewalk orators

talking about the end of the world."

"Nuts, my boy. Joe Citizen is going home after a hard day in the shop. He pecks at the wife, snarls at the kids, stretches out on the couch, unfolds the paper and says, 'Whaddya know? Space ships!' Then he reads the bowling league scores."

"But some people are alarmed!"

"You and I are alarmed, Larry. And responsible heads of governments. And chronic worriers. A lot of smart men in a lot of labs all over the world are doing some constructive thought on what makes those brutes stay up in the air and where they could have come from and what they want and how to get in touch with them."

"I want to do something," he said.

Her tone was soft. "Sure you do, Larry. You're identifying yourself with the heroic young men of your stories. You want to go steaming out and solve the great problem. Have you got a bank account?"

He gave her a puzzled stare. "A few hundred. Why?"

"Those ships are coming down somewhere. I have a beatup coupe in a garage around the corner. You'll be miserable the rest of your life unless you get a good look at them. When they come down we'll go take a look. Okay?"

He was suddenly excited. "That sounds wonderful!" Then he frowned. "But why do you care?"

"Have you ever had a woman give you an answer that gave herself away? Have you ever met a shameless woman?"

He swallowed hard. "I...I don't know."

She smiled. "Here's your answer, lad. I care because you care."

She stood up quickly and before he could make a sound she had left the room and closed the door behind her.

After giving her answer due consideration, Lawrence Graim stood up,

arched his chest, squared his shoulders and walked pompously around his room until he found that he was running into the furniture. Then he sat down, wearing a wide, fatuous, indelible smile.

AT EIGHT the next morning he was knocking on her door. She opened her door and he was so impressed with how good she could look in the morning that he forgot what he was about to say.

She said, "I heard it too, Larry. I'll be down to your room in ten minutes. And then we'll go. Make some of that coffee of yours. You're going to make some happy girl a good wife." She shut the door.

He went one floor past his room, walked back up. By the time the coffee was perking she came in carrying a small suitcase, a topcoat over her arm.

Over her coffee she said, "Every thrill seeker in Manhattan will be boiling out to take a look at the spot where they landed. We'll have to avoid the crowd. They're about eight miles northwest of Nyack. Everybody will be steaming up the parkway and crossing at the G. Washington Bridge. So we'll take the tunnel and circle around and come in from the back. I know the back roads in that area. Okay?"

"Fine with me. But why the suitcase?"

"This might be just a little more than a jaunt, Larry." He looked into her eyes and for a moment he shared her fear.

\* \* \*

After the fourth back road they tried was blocked with a jammed stream of yapping cars, a crescendo of klaxons, they gave up. Larry turned back, found a place where the ditch was shallow and pulled well off into a clump of brush. They locked the car, leaving the bags inside. He walked be-

hind her up the road, by the double line of cars, noting that she wore flat-heeled shoes, also noting that her walk was, to him, as intriguing as would be an intricate dance by any other woman.

Others were doing as they had done, and soon they were part of a long stream of pedestrians. Weary sweating men wearing self-consciously indifferent looks while their wives shepherded the kids. "Mommy, where's the Martians?" "Just a little way further, honey."

The feet stirred up dust from the shoulder. A little old lady sat with austere dignity in the back seat of a huge black sedan, trapped by lesser cars. A man had set up his pitch beside the road. "Getcher Martian balloons here! Balloons for the kiddies, lady? Watchem fly."

Peanuts and popcorn and balloons and ice cream. Holiday atmosphere. It could have been the National Air Races, or the P.G.A. Tournament, or the big day at Indianapolis, or Barnum and Bailey come to town.

Alice said, "For goodness sake get the look off your face, as though you smelled something bad. Now you know what really happens when spaceships land."

Troopers on motorcycles idled up through the crowds, motors thudding heavily, weary voices saying, "Stay in line. Stay in line."

It was a two-mile walk to where the ships had landed. And when Alice and Larry got there, they could see nothing but the backs of the multitude. People standing and talking and laughing and holding the children on high. "See the Martians, honey?"

The ships had landed in a vast open stretch where there were only a few lightly wooded hummocks.

Larry pushed Alice sideways through the crowd. He whispered,

"Over on the left there is a hill where we can see something."

The hill turned out to be steeper than it had looked. They went up the back of the hill and it was necessary to grab at the small trees, clutch at roots. Alice went down onto the shale, taking the knees out of both stockings and staining her dress.

AT LAST THEY came through the fringe of brush at the top and they could see the wide sunlit area, the vast crowd on the right in a huge semicircle. There were nine ships and they had landed in the form of a nine pointed star, but with a clear area in the center of the star about a half mile across. They were the fat, clumsy spokes of a vast wheel with an enormous hub. Larry once again got the impression of age so vast, so incredible, that the mere thought of it was dizzying.

He remembered something of the same feeling from an army stopover in Cairo, when he had gone out and looked at the pyramids. But this was intensified.

They were not mathematically spaced, but were subtly out of line, in keeping with their clumsiness in the air.

The bolder members of the crowd were right up next to the ships, shaded by the bulging overhang.

"I don't like their being so close," Alice said. "It makes me feel as though something were going to happen."

"I don't get it. They've landed in groups like this all over the world according to the radio. They've picked relatively level places. Like...well, like big slugs settling down on a ripe fruit."

Alice shivered. "That's almost too good, Graim. Save it for your next epic."

"Want to go down there?"

"Uh uh. I like it here. I like it very much here."

He moved to the side, found a grassy bank. They sat and smoked and looked at the thickening crowd, at the silent ships.

When a cloud moved across the face of the sun, Alice moved closer to Larry. It made him feel masculine and protective. He was tasting the delights of this new feeling when the side ports of the ships opened. They were rectangular sections, thirty yards wide, possibly fifty yards high. They were hinged along the bottom edge and the method of their opening was that they fell open. They were enormously thick, and so heavy that when they fell against the soil, the top edge was imbedded deeply.

And, of course, the spectators who had been standing there were instantly smashed into the ground.

There was an instant of silence, and then an enormous roaring scream of fear from the huge crowd. Except for a few dazed and hardy souls who had the vague idea of extricating their loved ones from the pulped soil and who clawed at the fallen ports as effectually as ants struggling with a boulder, every man, woman and child turned and fled, wide-eyed, gasping with fear, trampling the weak and the slow.

Within two minutes the ships had the vast area to themselves. Bodies lay where they had been trampled. A few moved feebly like half-crushed insects. The trampled grass was a litter of gum wrappers, empty cigarette packs, half-eaten sandwiches. Several toy balloons drifted forlornly toward the clouded sky.

Larry and Alice stood back from the grassy bank. His arm was around her waist and he felt the trembling of her body. "All those people," she whispered. "All those people."

"It wasn't on purpose," he said. "They were just in the way. It wasn't on purpose."

"That won't help the dead ones. And a few million people are going to be screaming for the bombers."

The ports were down. The sun came out but it cast little illumination into the interior of the ship they could see most clearly.

There was a distant clattering. From the dark interior of the ships corroded snouts were pushed out into the sunshine. They were very obviously machines. They teetered at the top of the ramp, then with a clattering of treads, they rolled down the ramps, out onto the grass. They seemed to be made of the same substance as the ships. Though they had rounded backs like beetles, there was an odd familiarity about them. Five came from each ship nearest them, and he counted four that came from one of the far ships. From two ships nothing emerged.

When they began work Larry snapped his fingers and said, "Of course! Bulldozers."

**T**HERE WAS a thin slanted blade at the front of each one, with the dark mouth of a narrow hopper above the blade. Each machine was roughly the size of a freight car. They lumbered into loose formation with some outside the circle of ships, others inside the circle. The blades dropped and they began to scrape the uneven soil.

They were amazingly efficient in their clumsiness. Larry watched in fascination, Alice completely forgotten. The dirt peeled up the edge of the blade into the hopper. And disappeared. There was no residue, no smoke, no elimination of any sort.

One of them went directly at a high mound and, with no reduction in speed, ate its way completely through the mound. The top of the mound col-

lapsed onto the rounded back, fell off in chunks. The next scraper ate up the chunks and, in a few minutes, the hill was no more.

He saw one of the scrapers heading toward where several bodies were silent, a few more trying desperately to crawl away. He gagged and turned his head as the flesh slid up the blade into oblivion.

It was efficient, and yet clumsy. He saw two of the scrapers meet on a converging track, nudge each other and go off at a crazy angle. One of them headed directly into the side of one of the big ships. The treads continued to revolve as it dug itself down into the ground.

When the hub of the vast wheel was level and clear, all of the ships moved toward the center and the scrapers worked on the area where the ships had been, on the rounded depressions where the mammoth weight of the ships had smashed the earth.

The scraper that had dug itself into the ground was overturned when the ship moved. It lay on its side, treads still turning, moving it around and around, much like a beetle trying to get back onto its legs.

Some few of the throng, mostly men, had drifted back. They watched from a very respectful distance.

As though on some signal, all of the scrapers except two turned back to the ships, crawled up the ramps and disappeared inside. After they were in, the treads on the overturned one stopped. One scraper was left outside the circle, standing silently. Larry saw the scar on its side and knew that it was the one which had had the collision.

"You want to go?" he asked Alice.

Her face was pale, her jaw set. "We stay," she said.

He looked at the cleared area. The scrapers had missed patches here and there. Not many. Just a few. Where

they had worked, the ground was scraped raw, scraped level.

Two military aircraft appeared over the trees, slowly circled the area, light observation planes.

Other machines came down the ramp. If the others had looked like beetles, these looked like tall spiders, with wheels at the end of each leg. From the small body of the spider tubes pointed downward at the ground. They lined up in loose formation and suddenly the tubes erupted with a blue-white glare, a roar of flame that rendered both Larry and Alice temporarily blind.

When they could see again, they found that it was impossible to look down at the area. The flames made an almost metallic roar. The sound lasted for a full half hour and, even with their backs turned to it, they felt the heat, saw the ghastly illumination on the leaves in front of them.

He thought of the possibility of radiation burns, and they went over the crest of the hill. When the sound was gone they returned.

**T**HE RAW DIRT had been transformed to a flat, silvery floor. It looked oddly like a lake of silver. The last of the spider things was disappearing into the nearest ship. Where the scrapers had done their job poorly, there were humps in the silver lake. The overturned scraper was half melted. A spider thing lay on its side beside the scraper. The other scraper stood, unharmed, outside the wide silver area. He saw that the ships had moved again to permit the place where they rested to be silvered over.

The area still radiated heat. The ships were silent. Larry said, "If they're going to do more, they're going to have to wait for it to dry."

Alice glanced at the fading day. "We better find the car."

A hundred yards down the road they met the military guard. "Restricted area," he said flatly. "Get out and stay out."

"What goes on?" Larry asked.

"The airforce is going to give those killers a taste of some two-ton bombs."

"But they didn't kill anybody on purpose," Larry said.

The guard spat, tucked his thumb in his belt and leaned toward Larry. "Mister, are you with us or against us? There's a lot of you crack-pot Martian lovers crawling out of the woodwork."

Alice tugged at his arm. "Come on, Larry."

"Do like the lady says, bud, or I'll drop on you like the door on a space ship."

Larry went down the road with her. It was dusk. They got in the car and turned on the radio.

"...martial law declared to cover those areas within the continental United States where the enemy ships have landed. Our observers report that the enemy ships are setting up defense areas, clearing the ground, paving it. It will be many days before the complete casualty figures are available, but the best estimates state that, in the sixty-three known places within our borders where the enemy has landed, average casualties were one hundred. Thus, nearly seven thousand have already died. This is the first time in the history of modern warfare that there have been civilian deaths within the borders of the United States. All attempts to communicate with the invader have failed. This Wednesday will go down in our history as the day when a great nation girded itself for a battle to the death against..."

Alice turned it off. "It's beginning to sound like one of your yarns, Larry."

"Thanks," he said dryly.

"But did you get the impression I did? I mean about their efficiency?"

He frowned as he started the motor, backed the car out. "Yes. The people from space should be horribly efficient and deadly. Those gimmicks of theirs are effective enough, but they use them the way a child would play with a ten-ton truck. The whole picture seems to be sort of out of focus."

"What do you think about the air force?"

"I think their bombs will rattle off those hulls like peas off a plate glass window. I think they'll have to break out the atomic bomb."

"That would be an approved part of the plot, eh?"

He slowed the car, gave her an odd look and said, "Alice, this may sound silly, but would you please pinch me? Hard."

She reached over and got a fold of flesh just above his knee between finger and thumb.

"Hey!" he yelled.

"Feel better?"

"I could still have been working too hard. Maybe when you're in a mental institution and you imagine you get pinched, it hurts."

"Stop the car."

He did so.

"Now come here."

He did so.

**T**HIRTY seconds later he moved back behind the wheel, said in a hoarse and shaking voice, "Okay. Those ships are sitting out there behind us and you are sitting beside me and I haven't had a breakdown."

Alice sat back in the corner of the seat, a wise and secret smile on her lips.

At ten o'clock they sat in his room and watched the photographs reproduced on the television screen. The first one showed the flare picture of

the nine ships taken from five thousand feet, before the raid.

The second picture showed the same nine ships after seventy tons of high explosive had been dumped on them. Except for a few dark stains on the silvery surface of what had been grassy fields, the picture showed no change whatsoever.

On the following morning they found that the enemy had been at work during the night. All encampments were in the same stage of development. Squat, rectangular structures were beginning to take shape within the central area. These structures were being built of silvery blocks which were being dug out of a central hole by an automatic digger. The procedure was to dig up a loose hopper of dirt and crushed rock which, on the video screen with the cameras run by a daring operator, seemed to be a half cubic yard. This dirt and rock went into a central compressor, was reduced startlingly to a small silver colored block or brick, placed in position by articulated arms and fingers which bore grotesque resemblance to a bricklayer hopped up with too much benzedrine.

Alice said, "Oh, I'm a gay little lass with brittle remarks for every contingency, but this I fail to like. I'm getting close to screams. This, Larry, is colonization, clumsy though it may be."

At eleven the video networks combined to show the status of construction at ten sites. One of them had been subjected to direct artillery fire. The artillery fire had disabled some of the brick-laying machines. One of them had Alice close to hysteria. The metallic fingers had been crushed and the machine continued the building of an invisible wall while the silver bricks piled up at the end of the chute from the compressor.

At the Cleveland site the scrapers

had done poor work. The walls were going up at grotesque, out-of-focus angles, as though seen through a distorting lense.

At a site near Portsmouth in the southern tip of Ohio, a tank column roared in onto the silver floor. Flame throwers spattered the equipment with sticky gobs of fire. Shells ricocheted off the dull armor of the equipment. The machines worked stubbornly on like picnickers undismayed by an invasion of beetles. The tanks looked oddly dwarfed by the massive hulls of the ships. When the ammunition was exhausted, the column retreated, having partially disabled two bricklayers and completely disabled three more by direct hits on the articulated fingers. The few score others worked on, raising the silver walls of the rectangular buildings and the disabled machines went through the motions, accomplishing nothing.

Statesmen made brave speeches. The public was told to be brave and steadfast. Bombs thumped into the sites. Near Keokuk a reckless construction worker, without authority, became a national hero by taking his big shovel, clattering up to the invader housing project and rattling off with one of the silver bricks in the teeth of the shovel. It was found to be quite warm, giving off no radioactivity, in weight about eight hundred pounds. Scientists guessed that its extreme weight and hardness came from a partial crushing of the atomic structure of the earth and rock. In all hardness tests, Rockwell, Brinell and others, it recorded off the scale. A high-speed diamond drill failed to scratch it. The brick was flown to Pittsburg where the most massive equipment of the steel industry failed to distort it.

**K**EITH Embuscado, klaxon-voiced commentator, said, in a special

program, "Even now they are inside those ships, sneering at our efforts, believing that we have no deadlier weapon which we can use against them. I say that now is the time to use our greatest weapon, the world's greatest weapon."

Alice said, "Very neat. Now when they use The Bomb, ole Keith can take the credit."

The site in Northern Wisconsin was selected for the use of the bomb, and all persons within a twenty mile radius were moved out late that day. Dawn was set for the trial use of the bomb.

Alice and Larry listened to the radio and watched the screen far into the night. They decided to stay up and wait for the reports of the bomb.

The grey dawn had taken on a rosy cast in the windows of Larry's room when the cold voice of the air observer came over the radio.

"Approaching target area to observe damage. The mushroom cloud has broken up. The bomb was exploded fifty feet in the air directly over the center of the site. We are at three thousand feet. I see the silvery area ahead of us. The ships are still in the same pattern. Now I can see the area clearly. All invader construction has been flattened. The center of the area is a tumbled mass of the silver bricks. Their equipment has been scattered. The ships unimpaired. The blast depressed the center of the silver area turning it into a shallow bowl." Suddenly there was a bit of excitement in the cold voice. "I see movement down there. Yes, movement. The scattered equipment is still in motion. Aimless, as though confused. Yes, going through the same motions as prior to the blast."

The commercial newscasters came on, a vanguard of analysts, and then a series of analyses of the analysts.

They climbed up one side of the subject and down the other, gradually making clear the facts that, except for the initial opening of the doors of the ships, no lives had been taken, that the atomic bomb was fine way off there in Wisconsin, but what would happen where the sites were close to cities, that already there were near panics over the depressed property values near the sites.

One newscaster stated that the Russians were rumored to have made contact with the invader and had enlisted aid and support in spreading, by force of arms, the communist doctrine.

Larry was baffled and confused. The invasion from space refused to fit into the accepted story lines, the approved plots, the standard situations. According to his training in the writing of science fiction, one of two things should have happened. One, the bomb should have brought direct retaliation, or two, it should have been harmless. This was the absurd third possibility. The bomb had wrecked one site and yet there was no retaliation.

This made it absolutely essential for him to devise a plot situation, a reason for this absurdity. Either that or go quietly mad.

"Why?" he asked thinly. "Why?"

Alice went over to him and pushed a vagrant lock of hair off his forehead. "It isn't going according to the books, is it, darling?"

"How can I even go back to work? I couldn't even extrapolate a trend. I couldn't even statistically predict an election."

He stood up and began to pace back and forth. He thought aloud. "The plot isn't going anywhere. The alien is efficient in many ways, absurd in others. It isn't a self-respecting invasion. It's more like a mechanical toy that..."



He stopped in midstride and gave Alice a long look. However it was a look that went through her and beyond her. Then he grinned delightedly, grabbed her and swung her around in a grotesque dance.

When she got her breath she said, "What? How?"

"Baby, get your hat. We're going calling on the invader."

"Have you gone out of your mind?"

"Completely. This is the only answer that will sell the story."

"Story? Sell?"

"I keep forgetting that this is happening. We have some phone calls to make."

AT DAWN they were on the familiar grassy bank where they had been before. Alice said, "You are grouchy in the morning, Larry."

"That's because I don't like it this way. I wanted it to be official. They thought I was a nut. So I have to get us smuggled in here by a newspaper that wants an exclusive. Did you see the look on their faces? They think we're never coming out."

"They are not alone," Alice said.

"You don't have to come with me."

"I don't want to, but I have to. Look! What are they doing now?"

It was barely bright enough to see. A new group of machines were at work. All of the ships had moved outside the silvery platform. The new machines were plasterers. The rectangular buildings were completed. The new machines were in a vast circle around the entire area. Their myriad mechanical arms terminated in flat fingerless hands the size of the top of a small table. Each machine was roughly the shape of a sitting Buddha, with, in place of the stomach, and open cauldron effect. The flat hands dipped into the cauldron, scooping out what looked like molten glass.

They patted it into a growing transparent wall. As the wall increased in height the machines, with every evidence of weightlessness floated up with the wall.

"Damn!" Larry said. "Now we can't get to the buildings. No. Wait! Do you see what I see?"

A third of the way around the circle one of the plastering machines worked busily, but with an empty cauldron. Thus the wall it was building existed only in its mechanical reflexes.

He took Alice by the wrist and hurried her down onto the flats. As they neared the floating machine she dug her heels in. She gasped, "Do you really know what this is all..."

"Just trust me. Come on." He gave one timid look up at the machine which floated fifteen feet in the air. He ducked instinctively as he ran under it. The silver floor was firm and hard underfoot. The morning sun, just appearing in the east, cast long rays across the compound.

The first building was fifty feet distant. There was a door in the side of it, a door but four and a half feet high. "Little guys," he said.

They ducked and went in. Her hand was like ice in his. He gave her a reassuring smile. "Standard attribute of intelligence. Desire for privacy and shelter. Probably true everywhere."

"They won't mind us poking around, friend?"

"Mind? Of course not."

The windows were oval and set very low, unglazed. The interior of the building was one room with a ceiling ten feet high. One corner of the room leaned crazily and some of the bricks lay on the inside floor, an open crack extending to the ceiling.

In a far corner was a larger cube, two feet on a side. The top of it glowed softly. Larry approached it,

held his hand out, smiled at Alice. "Desire for warmth. Maybe also a constant. Could cook on this thing. I guess that all primitives start civilization by learning about combustion. Lightning did it here on earth. Wonder what did it on their world?"

"Do you have to act like a man renting an apartment?"

"No furniture," he said. "Hmmm. Notice the softness of the floor in here. Seems to be a sort of rubbery film. Sprayed on, maybe. Luxury, eh?"

"May we please get out of here now before something bricks up that doorway?"

He shrugged. "No chance of their doing that. I want a look at the central building, the big one, and then we'll go visiting."

The doors were larger leading to the big building. It was silent, deserted, and but half constructed. There were many rooms, all empty. On the north side the wall was missing and the unsupported ceiling sagged dangerously at that point.

"Could you break down and start talking sense?" Alice asked.

"This all makes sense," he said firmly. "I'll let you figure it out."

**T**HE FLOATING machine was a good ten feet higher when they left the area. It worked busily on the empty air, slapping, patting, smoothing. They could see that the transparent walls, a good yard thick at the base, were tapering slightly and leaning toward the center.

"It's going to be a big dome," he said. "Pressure affair. Controlled atmosphere."

"Oh, fine!"

"Come on. We'll visit that one over there."

They went to the foot of the ramp. Larry pulled the two flashlights out of his jacket pocket, handed her one.

She looked fearfully up into the dark interior of the ship. He said, "Now act the same way you would crossing 42nd Street in the middle of the block at five thirty in the afternoon. When anything starts moving toward you, just get out of the way."

"I don't want anything moving toward me."

"Come on. There's nothing in here that wants to hurt you."

She took a deep breath. "Lead on."

The ramp led up into a room so vast that their lights barely illuminated the far walls. The floor was pitted and worn.

Larry walked slowly, speaking with the relaxed manner of a licensed guide. "Here, as you can see is the main equipment room. Those arches at either end probably lead to equipment storage. Let's take a look. Ah, yes. Those jobs over there. They're the scrapers."

He led her over. He looked closely and with curiosity at the worn condition of the treads, the pitted blade, the hopper over the slanted blade.

A wide ramp led down from one side of the second room. Below they found the spider creatures which had silvered the raw earth.

Gradually she began to lose her fear. They could not decide the use of some of the equipment. Everything had a look of age, of hard use, of countless centuries of blind toil.

Some of the more delicate machines, made of a different class of metal had crumpled where they stood. He picked up a bit of metal, flaked it between his fingers. "This was a poor specification," he said.

Back in the main room where the daylight shone in, he stopped, looked all around and said, "Over here. The little ramp."

They had missed it before. It went up the side wall to a small door at

the top. It was but two feet wide and the door at the top was less than five feet high.

Halfway up the ramp she hung back as she heard the busy clacking coming from the little room.

"It's them!" she gasped.

"I hardly think so," he said. "You can wait here."

"No, I'll come along if...if you're really going in there."

The room was but twenty feet square, the walls solid with odd wiring, transparent tubular relays, duplicated in the boards which were erected from the floor in the middle of the room. The clacking came from one of the panel boards. Larry walked over, held his light on the tiny relays.

In his occupation, Larry had become familiar with mechanical accounting and computing equipment. Though the materials were alien, the wiring a nightmare, there was yet a comfortable familiarity about the panel boards. Alice clung with both hands to his left arm, her fingers digging in just above his elbow.

"Sounds like a knitting contest in here," she said, a shake in her voice.

Larry threw his shoulders back and said resonantly, "Aha!"

Her grip loosened and she stepped back. "Oh, come now! You're cribbing lines. That's what the fictional hero says when at last he outwits the invader. Aren't you getting a shade ahead of yourself?"

Larry gave her a superior smile. He enveloped her in his long thin arms and attempted to kiss her roughly. The kiss landed next to her ear. A high heel thudded against his chin, an elbow drove most of the wind out of him and her forehead thumped him smartly under the eye.

"Now look..." he said indignantly.

"Not like that," she whispered. "Like this!"

The merry little panel boards clicked and clucked and Larry Grait had the unmistakable sensation that the ship had taken off in the general direction of Alpha Centauri. When the too brief moments ended, he was surprised to find that the space ship was at rest.

He said, "I guess I was feeling masterful or something. You see, for once I'm the hero of my own yarn and I've figured the plot line out. It has to be this way. It will give the newspaper that hired me to sneak in here a tremendous scoop, and it will make me rich and famous and I can marry you."

"After you ask me, maybe. But tell me what this is all about."

"You see, darling, mankind has had an enormous fear of these things, but actually the truth of the matter is that..."

"Bud, would you kindly move the love scene over into that corner out of the way?" a strange voice said.

Larry turned quickly, and saw a weary-looking man in a white smock and a tool apron standing just inside the doorway.

"Now see here!" Larry said. The man ignored him. He turned and shouted down the ramp. "Hey, Al!" he yelled. "Tell Joe and Charlie to keep an eye on those potbellies on the north side."

The weary one brushed by Larry and Alice, setting his gasoline lantern down, pulling a pair of pliers out of his tool apron. With the pliers he deftly opened four scimitar-shaped knife switches, wedged little strips of bakelite across the contact points so that the switches could not close.

There was a distant shout. The weary one went to the doorway. "What's that? Did the trick? Okay, tell Mr. Sweeney that I'm deactivating the whole works."

The weary one went back to the board and whistled softly between his teeth as he blocked the major control switches across the top of the panels. Slowly the clicking died out. The room became silent.

"May I ask the meaning of this?" Larry inquired with all the dignity he could muster.

"How'd you two get in here? Didn't you see the signs?"

"I am employed by the Express Courier and, at the risk of my life, sir, I came in here to..."

The weary one chuckled. "Sweeney catch you in here and it will be at the risk of your life, bud. How about shoving off and taking your dolly with you, eh?"

"We've been in here for over an hour and..."

"Oh, I guess the signs weren't up then. Take a look at them on your way out."

**W**OODENLY Larry Graim ducked under the low door frame and went down the ramp, Alice following him. She made an odd sound in her throat. He glared furiously at her and she worked so hard to keep her face straight that she nearly strangled. They stood at the top of the ramp that led out to the ground. All activity had ceased. The pot bellied plasterers had stopped applying the transparent liquid. They sat in a ragged circle, their spatulate hands folded.

Four trucks stood near the partially completed dome. A jeep roared over and skidded to a stop. An oversized man with crimson hair and a face like broken concrete piled out and roared, "Can't you read? Git offa the area, you two."

Larry pulled himself up. "Sir, I want to have it known that I..."

"Do you git or do I take the slack

of your pants and see how far I can throw you?"

Alice tugged at Larry. He walked along with her, half dazed. A hundred feet beyond the ships that formed the spokes of a huge wheel, with the dome as the hub, they found the perimeter signs.

**RESTRICTED AREA  
KEEP OUT  
Samson Construction**

"They can't do this to me," Larry said. "It spoils the plot!"

Again she had to pull him along. The Express Courier representative was gone. They went, in Alice's car, down to the newspaper building. Together, they went up to the news room. The city editor was roaring at copy boys, at the reporters, at the switch-board girl. The slot man on the copy desk was roaring at the men on the rim.

After twelve minutes the city editor noticed Larry Graim. "Well, whadda *you* want? Who are you?"

"I'm Lawrence Graim and I was hired to..."

"Graim? Oh sure, Graim. Look, kid. It just didn't pan out, see? Tell you what you do. Hack out a feature. Maybe we can use it in a few days. We'll pay space rates. Come back Tuesday."

"Could you please tell me what has happened?"

"Buy a paper, kid. It's all in there."

**L**ARRY GRAIM and Alice sat in his room. She had her shoes off, her legs tucked under her. "You make the *best* darn coffee, honey," she said.

"Intrepid young hero's claim to fame," he said with bitterness.

"Good coffee is something useful."

"Oh, dandy. I was such a smart

guy. And all the time the Samson organization had figured it out and they were quietly buying up the land where the ships had taken over before they moved in. Now they've turned one complete installation over to the government, just as a public relations gesture. They're working on the control devices and within a few weeks they hope to have that automatic equipment doing anything they tell it to. See their ads? They'll pave so cheap that they'll be low bidder on every road contract they want. Yeah, I was a real smart guy."

"Who were they, Larry?" she asked softly. "The ones who started it all?"

He shrugged. "We'll probably never know. Maybe they're all dead by now. Some wise old race at the other end of the universe. They were expanding. They needed new planets. So they set up a fleet for completely automatic preparation. The brain ship—that big baby in orbit around us—led the others like a hen with several thousand baby chicks. Find the planet, map it, pick the spots, build the domes, and the buildings and move along. Then when the actual bosses arrived, there were the housing projects all set for them. But that fleet has been going a million years too long. Or a billion. We don't even know that. It must have been a frighteningly efficient project at first. Now it is just blundering along. And so long as there is one ship left, it will keep on going. We could have stopped it if we could have grabbed the brain ship."

The soft radio music stopped and a man began to speak with excitement in his tone. Larry turned it higher.

"...that's right, folks. Every ship all over the world that hasn't been immobilized lifted about nine minutes ago. Already, on the sunny side of the earth, they are so high that they can't be seen. A report has come in that,

in Egypt, there are two domes, complete and perfect in every respect. The United States, with a head start, contains the greatest number of immobilized ships. And, believe me, we're going to find out all the secrets of those ships. The President today said that the world should be thankful for this technological gift from some unknown..."

Larry clicked the radio off. "Gone," he said dolefully.

"Gone to find a new planet. The ten thousandth planet, or the hundred thousandth," she said. "When we get to Mars, we'll probably find there the domes that they built."

He looked at her and smiled. It wasn't much of a smile. "And so tomorrow I go back to the method of least squares and the geometric graph paper. How thrilling! There I was, with the plot all figured out..."

She came over to him and curled into his lap, warm and soft as a kitten. She kissed the angle of his jaw. "You've still got the gal, darling."

"Yes, but..." he said.

She stopped his lips in an entertaining manner.

"Yes, but..." he said again.

Again she rendered speech improbable.

"I begin to see what you mean," he said shakily.

She sighed. "Besides, Lambie, you need me. You need a fresh viewpoint. You've been writing the same tired old story for years. Now, of course, space ships are out, the same as the atomic bomb. In the next story we write, how about a theme based on a culture where..."

He stared at her. "The next story we write?"

"Of course! I'm marrying you because it is the duty of every fan to help improve the level of science fiction."



# FIDO

*By Mack Reynolds*

**Man has his pets and becomes fond of them through long attachment. But there are others who desire the companionship—of man!**

## PREFACE

**T**HROUGHOUT any given year the newspapers of any and all countries carry daily news items concerning the strange disappearances of otherwise little known citizens. In our own country it is a matter of official record that some thousands of people vanish yearly, and with few exceptions, are never heard from again.


It is as if the Earth opened and swallowed them, leaving no trace.

This story is not to be construed as a factual account of any single disappearance. It is presented as pure fantasy and must be considered as such.

And yet, who knows...

**L**ESTER COLE found himself sprawled upon an oversized bed in a luxurious apartment which looked as though it had come straight from a Hollywood production. He shook his head fretfully; the last he could remember was walking toward the drugstore for a coke.

"Okay," he said aloud, "let's wake



As the young woman sobbed on the sofa, a strange laughter seemed to fill the room from a far distance in the void . . .

up. What gives?"

It didn't come back to him. He lay there awhile, trying to force an explanation from his mind. Had he just recovered from a siege of amnesia? If so, how long had it lasted, and where was he now?

He swung his feet over the side of the bed and surveyed the room. Along one side of it was a built-in television set; along another, bookcases. There was a tremendous easy chair, and beneath his feet the heaviest rug he'd ever set foot upon. The lighting was indirect and soft; he couldn't figure out its source.

One doorway opened into a small but complete bath, another into a kitchenette. He went back to the combination living and bedroom and continued his exploration. There were at least five hundred books upon the shelves. They included everything from detective stories to classics. A built-in bar took its place between bookshelves; the list of liquors it contained ran from absinthe to vodka and back. He picked up a bottle of Metaxa and considered whether or not it would be ethical to try a drink. He put it back, figuring that he'd better not get into anything until he knew the deal.

There was one more door leading from the living room but it was locked. He frowned. There weren't any windows in the place. It suddenly hit him hard; he was a prisoner!

There were no two ways about it. Of course, the place was comfortable enough and obviously the food and liquor, the books and radio, were meant for his use. But he didn't get it. Why?

It couldn't be a kidnapping; neither he nor his people had money; nobody snatched his type. It couldn't be spies; he didn't know anything of value to a foreign country.

He went to the bar and poured himself a pony of the Metaxa. At least he

might as well enjoy the things supplied him. He took the drink with him over to what he'd thought was a television set and found it wasn't orthodox. Its four identical dials had numbers from zero to nine, all set at zero. There was a pamphlet on top of the cabinet. He found it contained a comprehensive list of musical selections everywhere from calypso, through jazz, to classical; each piece preceded by a number. Toward the end of the booklet was a lengthy list of motion picture productions, most of the better films that had been released recently as well as a goodly number of screen classics. Each had a number.

IT SUDDENLY came to him. He took, at random, number 1052, "Blue Room." Setting the four dials at that number, he pushed the switch marked *On-Off* to the *On* position and the song immediately swelled into sound. He snorted and switched the set off. Looking through the movie productions, he found "Rebecca," number 7820. He set the dials and turned the set on again. The lights of the room went low; what he'd taken for the television screen lit up, and the picture he'd seen almost fifteen years ago began showing.

He shut the set off and went back to corner another drink. That phonograph-movie projector was out of place, there wasn't any such thing on the market. And, now that he thought of it, the lights were amazingly advanced too. If he picked up a book they brightened, if he switched on the movie screen, they decreased in intensity. They automatically adjusted to whatever he was doing.

A thought abruptly impressed itself on his mind. It was as though someone was saying:

*"Would you like to come in for awhile, Lester Cole? I am afraid you must be somewhat upset by this sud-*



den change."

Cole looked around for the source of the words, unsuccessfully. "Mental telepathy," he growled. "This is crazy."

"I'm afraid it's the only manner in which we can communicate," the thought said. "You'll become used to it."

"I hope not," he muttered acridly. "I should stay so long."

No words came back, but he gained an impression of appreciation of his attempt at humor in the mind of the other.

His eyes went to the door which had been locked; it stood open now. He figured that if this character wanted him to come out, he might as well. Obviously, it wouldn't be hard to come in and get him. Besides, thus far he'd been offered no violence.

He walked through the door and found himself in a room approximately ten times the size of those he was used to. But it wasn't the size that shocked him; the place was *alien*. Not with the alienness of Europe, or the Orient; it was alien to *earth*. Furnishings, ornaments, everything—just didn't *belong*.

He felt cold fingers creep up his back.

The thought said, "*Don't be alarmed Lester Cole. There is no danger.*"

He tried to cover the fear welling up inside him with a bold front. "Just call me Les," he growled. "Or better still, not at all."

He caught the feeling of dry humor again. Evidently whoever this joker was, he appreciated the ridiculous.

And suddenly Les saw it.

**H**AVING DONE the average amount of science-fiction reading, Les Cole was accustomed to having his aliens from space pictured either as half nude Princesses from

Mars, or completely nauseating creatures with an unbelievable plurality of legs, eyes, tentacles, and various unearthly appendages. Of course, in his mind, he had rejected the possibility that the ladies from Mars were of the type that won contests at Atlantic City. He actually expected alien life, if any, to be revolting in appearance.

This wasn't. The entity wasn't by any means human and it wasn't of earth, but, on the other hand, it was far from repulsive. For some reason, Les had brought to mind the face of Abe Lincoln, ugly and beautiful in its deep sadness.

The being rested upon a huge couch. Roughly, Les estimated it to be about fifteen feet in height and possibly four hundred pounds in weight.

There was a comfortable, human-type chair a few feet from the couch. "*Please sit down, Les,*" the thought said.

Les walked over with an air of confidence and made himself comfortable. He wondered who he was kidding; this thing could read his mind and obviously knew he was fighting off panic. He said, "I suppose the script calls for me to yell, 'Where am I, and what the hell am I doing here?'"

The sensing of humor again. "*You have an agile mind, Les. I appreciate it. I am afraid I can't tell you where you are since your knowledge of the . . . er, universe, precludes an understanding. And I would rather wait a time before telling you why you are here.*"

He was beginning to conquer his fear. Talking helped. "By the looks of that apartment, it's not difficult to guess that you've seized humans before. I'd make a rough guess and say you're studying us with the ultimate idea of landing on earth and taking over." He might as well get in a few licks of propaganda while he was at

it. "Brother, you've got a job ahead of you."

*"Your guess would be wrong. However, you will find yourself made as comfortable as is within my ability. Are the apartment, food, books, bed, and so forth, as you would wish?"*

Les was irritated. Evidently he wasn't going to be told why he'd been seized. "I haven't checked the books and food, but I notice that the best of the brandy is only a hundred years old," he said bitterly.

He was surprised to feel, in the next thought, a sensation of distress. *"I am extremely upset, Les. I thought I had made every effort to have you as comfortable as possible. Was there anything else you wanted?"*

He was going to say Lana Turner, but suddenly felt a twinge of conscience. He didn't know what he was doing here, or what the ultimate disposal of him was to be, but, after all, this creature had done what it could to make him comfortable. At least he wasn't in some kind of dungeon.

"As a matter of fact, it's very nice," he said grudgingly.

The thing was obviously relieved. *"Thank you. I have been upset at the possibility that you were without the things to which you're used. But now I believe you have arrived at the point where it is necessary you indulge in your human habit of sleeping. Why don't you retire?"*

WHEN LES COLE awoke, he expected to find himself at home in bed, remembering a dream that wasn't really a nightmare, although it should have been. In fact, he told himself, the place had been at Shangri La and he'd be willing to take some of that kind of imprisonment anytime.

He gave a short laugh and opened his eyes. He took in the indirect lighting, now softly increasing in intensity

since he was awake; the extensive bookcases; the phonograph-movie set, or whatever it was; the tremendous easy chair; the built-in bar.

"Here we go again," he groaned. It made a better dream than it did reality; a dream doesn't need any reason, this whole situation certainly didn't have any.

He dressed and made his way to the kitchenette, conscious of hunger. There was a tremendous refrigerator here. He opened it experimentally. It was packed with food ranging from luscious fruit to cold fried chicken. Bottled goods started with milk and soft drinks and wound up with beer and champagne. He peered into the cupboards and found further supplies in profusion, including half a dozen large cans of caviar. He'd never tasted caviar.

The deep freeze was filled with packaged meals. He picked up several. One label read: "*Oeufs aux tomates St. Antonine*, insert in Unit Four, five minutes." He looked at the small stove and located the door marked Unit Four.

"Stop me if I'm wrong," he told himself, "but I seem to recall that *oeufs* are eggs. The rest I'll take a chance on." He popped the package into the Unit Four compartment and began figuring out how to achieve coffee, toast and butter. He didn't have much trouble.

After eating, he returned to his living room and immediately spotted two bottles that hadn't been there the night before, setting on the bar. The labels were weathered and indecipherable, but he didn't have to be told what they were.

He stared at them. "I'll bet the stuff was laid down by Julius Caesar," he muttered inwardly.

The thought said, "*If you are awake now, Les, perhaps you would like to stroll in the gardens. You haven't been*

*out in the fresh air for some time."*

The door leading to the larger room was still open. "All right," he said, "I'm coming." Evidently, the thing's plans included keeping him in as good health as possible.

Standing, the creature seemed even larger than before. It led the way, walking slowly, to the garden. Les felt the edge of humor he'd noticed the night before in the next thought.

*"You were amusing yourself at my expense when you requested the brandy, Les. It isn't usually as old as you gave me to believe. But it was amusing to meet your challenge. You will be pleased to learn they are the two oldest bottles on earth."*

He refused to let his mind consider some of the implications in the other's words; it was too much.

They had reached the garden now, and his worst fears, the suspicions he'd been trying to keep submerged, were realized. This was utterly foreign, not of earth; and he suspected it wasn't even of the solar system and possibly not of the universe he knew. It was beautiful, unbelievably, indescribably, beautiful; but terribly alien, from the blue-gold sun above to the technicolor sand at his feet.

But the shock was quick to leave him; he'd had too many new things happen these last few hours for this to floor him. He looked about with keen interest and asked questions when something he didn't understand presented itself. He always got answers, evidently nothing was taboo.

He wandered around noting everything, including the fact that his host, or jailer, as the case might be, evidently had a metabolism considerably slower than that of man. It moved ponderously and Les covered ten yards for every one of the alien's, in spite of the latter's great size. He briefly considered making his escape at this time, but

rejected the idea. As yet, he had no idea of where to flee, or what methods his captor had available to recapture him. He'd best learn more of the ropes before he stuck his neck out.

LATER, IN his room, he sat in his deep chair and tried to make some sense out of the situation. Obviously, these creatures were far in advance of earth in their science. And, seemingly, they were studying man. Why? No matter how much he mulled it over, there was only one answer. They were interested in taking over the earth. But, if that were so, why hadn't they done it already? They obviously had the power and the ability.

He got up and went over to the bar and picked up one of the brandy bottles. He wondered how the thing had ever got hold of it. For that matter, how had it got hold of him? The cork was still good; he opened the bottle and poured a sizable slug into a sniffer glass and returned to his chair. He couldn't think of anything he could do at present toward escaping. Until he acquired more information, he might as well take it easy.

He spent the rest of the day with the books, the movies, the bar and the kitchen. And the next day, and the next. Except for daily walks and talks with the alien creature, his life began to assume a pattern which didn't take it beyond the little apartment. He decided that life wasn't so bad, even in jail, if you picked the right jail; although it would help if you knew what you were in for, and for how long.

But a week later—judging passing days by the number of times he'd slept—he still wasn't adjusted to his new environment. For one thing, he was drinking too much, for another, he couldn't get the escape bug out of his head. Ordinarily, he thought, he

wouldn't mind this situation. He liked books, good music, good food and liquor, and had never been able to afford them before. He didn't even particularly mind the absence of other humans; besides, he'd been told there were others here and that he'd meet them shortly. His own company had always been his favorite anyway. But he couldn't enjoy these things, not knowing the why and wherefore of it all. Why was he here? How long would he stay?

Within himself, he felt some responsibility to the human race. He'd been kidnapped for some purpose. What was it? What happened to the human race? If it was in danger from these aliens, he certainly wasn't doing anything here to protect it.

He snorted. As though there was anything he could do. As far as his own treatment was concerned, he reminded himself of how on a farm the kids will have a pet chicken, or calf, or lamb, and treat it like a member of the family. They love it all to pieces, but just the same when slaughter time comes...

**T**HAT NIGHT he entered the large room for his customary talk with the alien. He could feel its thoughts and recognized that it was worried about him.

"*You aren't happy, Les.*"

"How could you expect me to be suddenly taken away from my home and relatives and be satisfied? Besides that, the mystery of all this upsets me. What am I doing here? Why are you keeping me prisoner? What plans are you making for earth?"

An impression of distress. "*You are not a prisoner, Les. You are free to do whatever you please, or go where you wish. —And your earth is in no danger.*"

"Could I go back to earth?"

"*I am sorry you want to go, Les. There is no return. Please try to adapt yourself to this new home.*"

"But why am I here? What do you want of me? I don't get it."

He could sense infinite sadness in the thought of the other. "*In all the universe, Les, there is no living thing, small or great, that is alone as is the garook—my race. Eons before we developed the scientific progress you marvel at, our fundamental instincts were formed. These instincts prevent garook from feeling affection for garook, except during a brief mating season that comes only once in five of your earth years. In our early existence, the bare sight of another of our species led us to dash madly together, rending and tearing, until one was dead. The reasons for this are too many and would be too strange for you to understand, although some of your deep sea forms of life on earth have similar instincts. At a distance, telepathically, we were able to cooperate with each other; but proximity meant bloodshed. As we developed, we were able to overcome some of this instinct, but not all. Even today, I am extremely uncomfortable in the presence of another garook, as he is in mine.*"

"*This was bearable in the early days of the race, perhaps, but as we have grown intellectually, the need has developed for that greatest of all attributes of the intelligent mind. I speak of the need of companionship, attachment, sympathy.*"

"I...I still don't get it," Les said, confused.

There was a touch of affection in the thought that came back. "*In all the universe, Les, there are few species that can feel attachment for any except its own kind. Of them all, man has the greatest capacity for love, sym-*"

*pathy and understanding. Even in your most primitive form, you brought the dog into your caves and into your hearts. Man has had to be cruel as he fought his way upward, but it was not a cruelty that came from the heart, it was born of necessity. He has had to use the other animals of his planet for food and for beasts of burden, but always beneath this need was a capacity for affection that is amazing. You see, thus far man has not been able to live up to his Golden Rule which has been expressed by his wise men and his holy men in all ages, but at least he strives toward that goal. His mind is capable of conceiving it and desiring it."*

Les sat quietly for a long time. "I believe I am beginning to understand," he said finally. "If you don't mind, I think I'll retire to my apartment. I've got a date with a bottle."

*"One other thing, Les. I have noticed that you have been lonely and upset since you have been here. I hope you will change. I have a surprise that I believe will be pleasant."*

"All right," Les said. "Good night."

The feeling of affection. "Good night, Les."

**H**E WALKED slowly to his apartment and opened the door.

She sat up quickly from where she had been sprawled on the bed. Her eyes were swollen with tears and she was obviously terrified.

"Who are you?" she stuttered.

Les stared at her. "How did you get here?"

She shook her head in bewilderment. "Don't you know? I was coming home from work. Suddenly..."

He nodded wearily. "...Suddenly you were here." He went over to the bar and mixed two strong ones, using the twenty-year-old Irish Whiskey. He made a mental note to ask the

garook to get him some more of it; he was running low.

He took the drinks over to the bed and handed her one. "You'd better take this," he said. "You'll probably need it."

She took it hesitantly. "I'm afraid you've put something in it...or something."

Les shook his head. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm in the same boat you are." He explained, as well as he could, where they were and what was in store for her. By the time he was finished, she was sobbing again. He sat beside her on the bed and put one arm protectingly around her shoulder.

"It's not really bad at all. You're secure here. You'll have everything you want."

"But my family, my friends. What will they think, what will they do?"

He patted her rounded arm. "It will be one more mysterious disappearance. It will hurt, at first, but life goes on."

She couldn't accept it. "I don't understand. What do these awful things want? Why did they kidnap us?"

His heart went out to her. "I believe I've just about got it straight. You see, the garooks have a great capacity for love and understanding but can't find it between themselves. They are scientifically advanced beyond our conception, but they desire affection desperately. They bring men into their homes for companionship. What it amounts to is...well, they keep us as men keep dogs."

She looked at him strangely. "But if this one already had you, what did he want me for?"

He was embarrassed. "My garook...my master...was afraid I was unhappy. He had given me everything he could conceive of, books, movies, food, drink. But I was still unhap-

py about my new existence..."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, then her eyes widened and her face went red.

From a great distance they both seemed to hear a pleased, satisfied laughter...

THE END

## THE MINE-LAYER



By Milton Matthew



**H**EROISM COMES from the most unexpected quarters. Lee Senn, now a name familiar to hundreds of millions, was the first of the little heroes who came out of the Second Martian War. What makes it more striking is that Lee wasn't even a crewman, much less an officer in the Service. He was a plain and simple miner, nothing more.

When the official notes of war came, with the destruction of Terran property on Mars, the pulses flashed out, ordering all Earthmen operating space vessels to report to the nearest friendly base at once.

Lee had just loaded up his little craft with precious vanadium ore. The coded pulse just received meant that he'd have to head for the Venusian Base, deposit his cargo and immediately join the Service. All spacemen are members of the Service Reserve.

But Lee wanted to get home. Since the time element wasn't greatly different, he'd put down on Luna City. Then he could go into Service. His decision made, he plotted his course and opened the uranium motors.

The journey from the Asteroid Belt was completely uneventful. He spotted no Martian Patrols, nor was he picked up or questioned by anyone. The transmitter kept him informed of action, and he heard of the cataclysmic Pyrrhic victory gained by Earth in a space battle which cost both sides tremendous losses and which decided nothing. Now the war would go into the attribution stage.

It was eight million miles from Luna base that the Martian super-battleship picked him up in its radar, and flashed the pulse: "Cut your jets. We'll send out a boat for you!"

The command was curt and positive. Ordinarily Lee would have obeyed. He knew he didn't have a chance to run or fight, yet some perverse element in his nature refused. He flipped the controls into high power and shot like a bug in a flat trajectory for Luna.

It is never known why the Martian commander decided to run down Lee, why he wanted to pick up the little vessel. Whatever his motives, instead of blasting Lee out of space, he followed him. Perhaps he thought Lee might have had some important information.

Lee's instruments showed the Martian

looming up only a few hundred miles to his rear. Frantically, the spaceman went to work. With a bar of uranium, a few electronic tubes and a crude sheet metal shell from an ore bay, Lee assembled a bomb.

The Martian quickly—a matter of two hours—matched speed and course and soon was drawing up on the little mining vessel. He was no more than a mile away riding Lee's wake, and preparing to launch a pick-up boat. It was now or never.

Suited, Lee kicked open the air-lock and dumped his hastily contrived "mine." The vicious little chunk of metal, carrying the velocity of the "mine-layer" floated behind Lee's vessel. A crudely rigged flare-rocket gave it a kick in the battleship's direction. The mine moved slowly rearward.

Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of the move, that lost the Martian commander. Who expects offensive action from a trivial little space boat?

The speed of the bomb was slight. It was a fraction of a mile from the monster Martian battleship. The latter's detectors could not sense such a small mass nor differentiate it from the boat itself at such a short distance.

Consequently, even as the lock of the Martian ship opened to permit the emersion of a space-boat, the improptu mine struck it squarely on the nose.

There was a catastrophic flare of light as twenty pounds of uranium converted itself into radiant energy! From a proud and powerful vessel, the Martian battleship was reduced in the twinkling of an eye to a mass of junk, peopled by dead and dying men.

The radiant flare filled space with light ranging through the spectrum, and the Service Patrols picked it up instantly and flashed on the scene.

Unharmcd and waiting to greet them from the rather pummeled hulk of his little space-craft, was Lee. It was some time before Lee managed to convince the Service people of what he had done. Eventually of course, the truth became clear and Lee was feted as few men have been. The very act was a shot in the arm to the sagging morale of Terran forces, and the ultimate victory in the Second Martian War is due, in no little respect to the single accomplishment of Lee Senn, miner—and mine-layer...

# "QUIET - PLEASE!"



By A. T. Kedzie



**N**O DIRECTOR shouting at the top of his lungs, could be more demanding in requiring silence, than an instrument-maker crying for steady temperatures. There is a small, but all-important segment of modern industry in the world, which demands absolute silence and absolute temperatures in its exacting work. This is that esoteric group of scientists who make precision scales, lead screws and accurate measuring tools for both machines and astronomical purposes.

Graduating the scales consists in the simple operation of scratching marks on a sheet of glass or metal with a diamond scriber. It sounds easy—but it's all done automatically by machines which are untouched by humans when once set going. For it happens that a human being is a radiant heat plant whose slight body temperature is enough to throw these precise tools completely out of kilter if that body

is without a hundred feet of the cutter.

Therefore the rooms in which the engraving and scribing are done are huge concrete-walled chamber insulated and supported on rigid, tremorless pillars set hundreds of feet below the ground. The tool-maker sets his machines, turns the thermostat to sixty-eight degrees, and then walks out, leaving the gadget to do the job. It is impossible to inscribe an angular dividing device, for example, if a human being has been near the machine in the last ten hours! It takes that long for the machine to settle into "thermodynamic equilibrium."

To top it off, a seismograph is kept going in the dividing engine room, to detect any minute tremors or earthquakes which may have thrown off the machine slightly! Talk about precision! These boys could engrave a gnat's whisker into a million parts!



## SABOTEUR...



By J. R. Marks



**A**T ROCKET Port Customs, the passenger passed through with no trouble. He carried himself with the slightly disinterested air of one to whom travel is slightly boring. He looked exactly like what he claimed to be.

"Did you check this guy, Kaltari somebody-or-other, Jack?" one of the agents asked.

"Clean as a whistle," Jack replied. "His passport and visa both say Finnish structural engineer—and his baggage is empty—no apparent Commie connections. Seems O.K. to me."

"Just for the hell of it, I'm going to buzz intelligence," the agent said. "You never know."

"Go ahead," the other shrugged. "I think you're just wasting time though."

They let the Finnish engineer through, but immediately the agent put through a communc to the Custom Police.

Consequently the smooth-faced Finnish engineer was entirely unaware of the two men tailing him. A close observer might have seen his lip curl after he'd gone through the customs, almost as if he were thinking, "what stupid people."

Kaltari Sem registered at a small hotel and behaved unobtrusively and unuspiciously, exactly as one would expect of a man who is interested in architectural and structural work. He remained that way for two weeks and the agents were about to give up the chase when a peculiar quirk in his behavior was noted.

Kaltari Sem went to a radio supply house and purchased seventy dollars worth of miscellaneous parts. The agents followed him and checked up on what he had bought. Off-hand it was an innocuous list. Vacuum tubes, condensers, resistors, a chassis and odds and ends such as one would expect for the building of a radio amplifier. But the same things that go into an amplifier go into a transmitter...

It was a simple matter to put an observer in the room next to Kaltari Sem. The agent watched the whole proceeding. As calmly as a man involved in innocent work, Kaltari built something on the chassis he had bought—and when the job was done the agents just as calmly, stepped in and arrested him.

"Kaltari Sem?—come along. We arrest you for sabotage—potential sabotage that is."

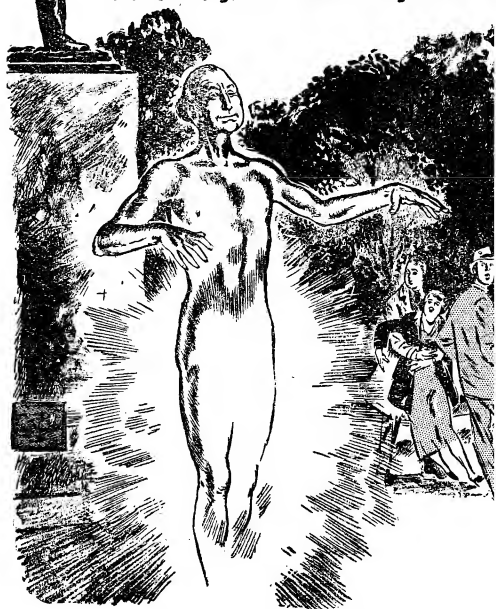
In spite of the man's vigorous protests that he was simply an amateur radioman, that he'd built the gadget as a hobby, he was dragged into headquarters and it wasn't much of a job to sweat the truth from him.

The little "amplifier" he'd built was nothing less than a micro-wave transmitter, a beacon guide for guided missiles to center on. The frequency was high and a super-sensitive receiver in the nose of a war-headed rocket could easily pick it out.

Very little fuss was made over the disappearance of the mild Finnish engineer, "Kaltari Sem..."

# The REMARKABLE

**A naked man appearing on the streets of Washington was a strange occurrence—but how he got there was stranger still!**



Before the statue the air began to glow, and then a strange figure shimmered into view . . .



# FLIRGLEFLIP

By William Tenn



**B**ANDERLING, you are a fat-head!

Yes, yes. I know. It is rather improbable that this message will reach you in the years that remain of your smug life; but if something, some new discovery—an unexpected warp in the plenum, say—should bring these pages to the surface, I want Thomas Alva Banderling to know that I consider him the most dilated, augmented and amplified fathead in the history of the race.

Excepting myself, of course.

When I consider how happy I was puttering around my collection of dolik and spindfar, how splendidly my paper on *Gillian Origins of Late Pegis Flirg-Patterns* was progressing—when I recall that bliss only to be recalled in turn to the filthy, dripping necessities of my present vocation, I tend to become somewhat unacademic in my opinions of Banderling.

But now that I have informed Banderling of his cephalic obesity across fantastic gulfs of emptiness, what, after all, is left for me? What chance do I have of returning to the creamy towers of the Institute rising in plastic beauty from the septic Manhattan soil?

I like to dream of the scholarly exhilaration I felt the day we of Field Party Nineteen returned from Mars with a shipload of Punforg out of the Gillian excavation. I like to muse on my delighted reacquaintance with the problems I had left unsolved when the field trip was offered me. Banderling

and his obscene radiation depressor? Why, that night was the first time I really noticed him!

"Terton," he asked suddenly, his face focusing sharp and studious in the screen of my benscope, "Terton, could you look in at my lab for a moment? I need an extra pair of hands."

I was startled. Beyond occasional meetings at Institute Assemblies, Banderling and I had had little reason for conversation. And it was fairly rare for an Associate Investigator to call on a full Investigator for mechanical assistance, especially when their fields were so different.

"Can't you get a labtech or a robot?" I asked.

"All the labtechs have gone. We're the only ones left in the Institute. Gandhi's Birthday, you know. I told my robot to package himself two hours ago when I thought I was leaving. Now I find there's nobody in Control to activate him again, and my depressor's started to excite. Won't take long."

"Very well," I sighed, necklacing both my flirgleflip and the dolik I had been examining with it. As I walked into the benscope, giving my necklace the required tugs for the opposite wing of the Institute, I had already ceased to wonder at the oddity of Banderling's request.

The dolik on which I had been working, you see, was the so-called Thumtse Dilemma—a thoroughly fascinating business. Most of my colleagues inclined towards Gurfkeyser's statement of the problem when he discovered it at Thumtse over fifty years ago. Gurfkeyser declared that it couldn't be dolik because of the lack of flirg-pattern; and it couldn't be spindfar because of the presence of flirg in minute quantities; therefore it was a consciously created paradox and, as such, had to be classified as punforg. But, by definition, punforg could not exist at Thumtse....

My investigation, however, had convinced me that a flirg-pattern flirgled in a primitive sense—that is, only in the green. Was this sufficient proof of dolik? I thought so and was prepared to support that assertion in my forthcoming monograph. First, I intended to point out, no dolik has ever—

**I WANDER.** Once more I forget the reactions of my audience to this subject. If only this were not so, if only on this one point—In any case, I was still considering the Thumtse Dilemma when I stepped out of the benscope into Banderling's lab. I was not at all prepared psychologically to make the obvious deductions from his nervousness. Even if I had, who could have imagined such psychotic behavior from an Associate Investigator?

"Thanks, Terton," he nodded, his necklace jangling with the gadgetry that physicists seem to find necessary at all times. "Would you hold that long bar away from the turntable and press into the grid with your back? Right." He sucked at the knuckles of his right hand; with his left, he flipped a toggle and clicked a relay shut. He turned a small knob past several calibrations, frowned doubtfully and moved it back to an earlier mark.

The turntable before me—a wheel-like affair whose spokes were resistor coils and whose hub was an immense mesotronic tube of the type used in a national benscope hookup—began to glow and whirl softly. Behind me, the grid was vibrating gently against my shoulder blades.

"There's—uh, nothing dangerous in what I'm doing?" I asked, moistening my lips at the roomful of fully operating equipment.

Banderling's little black beard shot up scornfully and the very hairs on his chest seemed to quiver. "What could be dangerous?"

Since I didn't know, I decided to

feel reassured. I longed for Banderling's help in the process, but he was moving about rapidly now, sneering impatiently at meters and slapping at switches.

I had almost forgotten my uncomfortable position and the light bar I was holding, and was considering the middle passage of my paper—the section where I intended to prove that the influence of Gil was fully as great as Tkes upon later Pegis—, when Banderling's booming voice thrust a question into my consciousness.

"Terton, don't you often feel unhappy that you live in an intermediate civilization?"

He had stopped in front of the turntable and placed his overlong hands upon his hips in a slapping gesture which suggested somehow that he didn't find universal entropy proceeding satisfactorily.

"What do you mean—the Temporal Embassy?" I asked. I'd heard of Banderling's views.

"Exactly. The Temporal Embassy. How can science live and breathe with such a modifier? It's a thousand times worse than any of those ancient repressions like the Inquisition, military control or university trusteeship. You can't do this—it will be done first a century later; you can't do that—the sociological impact of such an invention upon your period will be too great for its present capacity; you should do this—nothing may come of it now, but somebody in an allied field a flock of years from now will be able to intergrate your errors into a useful theory. And what do all these prohibitions and restrictions accomplish; whose ends do they serve?"

"The greatest good of the greatest number in the greatest period of time," I quoted firmly from the Institute prospectus. "That humanity may continually improve itself by re-

shaping the past on the basis of its own historical judgment and the advice of the future."

He nodded a sneer at me. "How do we know? What is the master plan of those ultimate humans in that ultimate future where there is no temporal embassy from a still later period? Would we approve of it, would we—"

"But Banderling, we wouldn't even understand it! Humans with minds compared to\* which ours would look like elementary neural responses—how could we grasp and appreciate their projects? Besides, there seems to be no such ultimate future—merely temporal embassy after temporal embassy sent by each age into the preceding one, the advice of each embassy in the period from which it came. Temporal embassies extending always into the past from the improving future, temporal embassies without end." I paused, out of breath.

"Except here. Except in an intermediate civilization like ours. They may go out to infinity as far as the future is concerned, Terton, but they stop in our time. We send nobody into the past; we receive orders, but give none of our own."

**I** PUZZLED OVER Banderling as he examined the greenly sparking mesotron tube with a quantum analyzer and made an adjustment among his controls which excited it still further. He had always been considered a bit of a rebel at the Institute—by no means bad enough for a Readjustment Course, however—, but surely he knew that the organization of the Institute itself was the first suggestion made by the Temporal Embassy when our age durated into its time-fix? I decided that the difficulty with his equipment which I was helping remove had irritated him out of normal reasoning processes. My mind trotted back to

important items like spindfar problems, and I began to wish that Banderling would relieve me of the long bar so that I could denecklace my flirgleflip.

Not that I believed the Thumtse Dilemma could conceivably be spindfar. But it was possible, I had suddenly realized, for flirg—

“I’ve been told to call off work on my radiation depressor,” the physicist’s morose voice sliced into my thoughts.

“This machine, you mean?” I inquired rather politely, concealing my annoyance both at his interruption and the sudden increase of warmth in the lab.

“Hum. Yes, this machine.” He turned away for a moment and came back with a modified benscope projector which he placed in front of me. “The Temporal Embassy merely *suggested* it, of course. They suggested it to the Institute administration which put it in the form of an order. No reason given, none at all.”

I clucked sympathetically and moved my perspiring hands to another position on the bar. The vibrations of the grid had almost worn a checkerboard callous into my back; and the thought of being involved in an experiment with revoked equipment when I could be doing constructive investigation into dolik, spindfar and even punforg made me almost pathologically unsocial with impatience.

“Why?” Banderling demanded dramatically, throwing opened palms into the air. “What is there about this device which requires an ultimatum to stop its progress? I have been able to halve the speed of light, true; I may be able to reduce it even further in the tube, possibly to zero, eventually. Does such an increase of man’s scientific powers seem dangerous to you, Terton?”

I pondered the question and was happy to be able to answer in all hon-

esty that it didn’t. “But,” I reminded him, “there have been other direct revocations of projects. I had one. There was this dolik which was most curiously flirgled, evidently a product of Middle Rla at the peak of its culture. I had no more established the Rlaian origin when I was called to—”

“What have these infernal, incomprehensible thingumajigs to do with the speed of light?” he blasted at me. “I’ll tell you why I was ordered to stop work on my radiation depressor, Terton, after eleven years of mind-breaking research. This machine is the key to time-travel.”

The offence I had decided to take was forgotten. I stared at him. “Time-travel? You mean you’ve discovered it? We have reached the point where we are permitted to send a temporal embassy of our own into the past?”

“No. We have reached a point where journeying in time is possible, where a visit to the past may be made, where we *are able* to set up an embassy in a previous period. But we will not be allowed to do it! Instead, I drop my radiation depressor so that a century later, say, when the Embassy approves, some other physicist will build a machine using my notes and research—and be credited by history as the father of time-travel.”

“Are you sure that it’s time-travel? Possibly only a—”

“Of course I’m sure. Haven’t I been measuring duration-gap since the first indication of electro-magnetic dampening? Didn’t I lose two mesotronic tubes before the reverse field had even approached optimum? And didn’t I duplicate the experience of the tubes with over fifteen rabbits, none of which have reappeared? No, it’s time-travel, Terton, and I have to drop it. Officially, that is.”

His tone confused me. “What do you mean ‘officially’?”

**B**ANDERLING drew a universal necklace across the screen of the benscope until it began to inglav. "Well, by officially—Terton, would you mind lifting the bar to your chest? A little higher. Fine. We'll be all set in a moment. Suppose someone from the present should be sent into the past as a result of a laboratory accident? Time travel would be an accomplished fact; the man who had built the machine that had accomplished it would be the accredited discoverer—the Temporal Embassy and all its plans notwithstanding. That would cause repercussions clear to the last dwindling curvature of time!"

I shivered, despite the extreme warmth of the lab at this point. The bar, which probably had been renucleied by the mesotronic tube, began curling around my chest, pressing me even harder against the vibrating grid.

"It would," I agreed. "If anyone were fool enough to try it. Seriously, though, do you really think your radiation depressor could send a man from our time into the past and bring him back? Assuming that you would be acceptable to the Temporal Embassy as the inventor?"

The physicist put the necklace aside as the benscope inglaved fully. "I couldn't effect the return with my equipment. But the Temporal Embassy would take care of that. Why, even they have only emissaries operating in the pre-intermediate civilizations—highly trained operatives working secretly and under great difficulties to make the necessary alterations in cultural evolution without the dislocation that would be caused by a Temporal Revelation to primitives. Anyone from our time who wandered into a previous period would be brought back in a hurry. And since the Temporal Embassy permits itself only advisory functions in an intermediate civilization, he'd be

brought back alive with a suggestion to Administration that he be shut up somehow. But no matter what happened after that, the secret would be out, the mission would be accomplished. Administration would probably shrug its bureaucratic shoulders and decide to accept the existence of time-travel with its attendant Advanced Civilization status. Administration wouldn't object to that at all, once the thing were done. And the temporal embassies would ricochet irritation ahead for a couple of million years; but they'd have to revise their plans. Their grip on history would be broken."

I saw it. Fascinating! Imagine being able to go back to Tkes, to Gll, to splendid Brzzin, and observe the actual flirgling of dolik! Imagine solving once and for all the Thumtse Dilemma by watching its creation! And what fantastic new knowledge of the flirglers themselves? We knew so little. I would be particularly interested in the relationship of punfong to—

Unfortunately, the dream was only that. Banderling's radiation depressor had been revoked. He would work on it no more after tonight. Time-travel was for another age. I slumped unhappily against the encircling bar.

"That's it, Terton!" the physicist yelled delightedly. "It's approaching optimum!" He picked up the universal necklace and held it over the screen of the benscope.

"I'm glad it's working again," I told him. "This grid has been punishing my back. If you'd denuclei the bar, I could finish some work with my flirgleflip right here in your lab. Really, Banderling, I don't want to rub salt on a favor, but I have research to do."

"Don't forget your training," he warned me. "Keep your eyes open and make careful mental notes of everything you see until you're picked up."

Think how many investigators in your wing of the Institute would scramble to be in your place, Terton!"

"My place? Helping you? Well, I don't know—"

Then the turntable canted towards me in a flash of oozing green light; the bar seemed to melt into my chest and the grid to flow down my rigid back. Banderling's face tilted out of recognizable perspective through shimmering heat waves. A great goblet of ear-piercing sound poured over my head and numbed my hearing, my mind, my— Nothing was left but a memory of Banderling's grin.

I was cold. I was very cold.

I STOOD on a ridiculously stony thoroughfare, looking at a scene from Washington Irving, Mark Twain or Ernest Hemingway—one of the authors of *that* period, in any case. Brick buildings were scattered carelessly over the landscape like a newly-discovered trove of spindfar, metal vehicles crawled noisily past on both sides of me, people walked on the raised stone sections near the ugly little buildings with leather clogs laced tightly to their feet and bandages of various fabrics wrapping their bodies.

But above all, it was cold. Why, the city wasn't even air-conditioned! I found myself shivering violently. I remembered some drawing I had seen of an urchin shivering in just such a scene. Medieval New York, the site of the Institute! 1650 to 1980, was it?

Abruptly I remembered the last moments in the lab. And understood.

I raised my fists to my face. "Banderling!" I shrieked at them. "Banderling, you are a fathead!"

This, so far as I can remember, was the first time I used a remark which was to become a cliché with me. Let me repeat it nonetheless, out of a full heart and an aching body— Banderling, you are a fathead! *Fathead!*

Somewhere, a woman screamed. I turned and saw her looking at me. Other people were laughing and pointing. I gestured impatiently at them, sunk my head on my chest and tried to return to consideration of my predicament.

Then I remembered.

I didn't know exactly when I was, but one thing all of these pre-intermediate civilizations had in common: a clothes fetish with severe penalties for those who disregarded it.

Naturally, there were other reasons. I wasn't certain which of them was most important here. For example, there was evidently no thermostatic control of the atmosphere in this area, and the season was the cooling third of the four ancient natural ones.

A gesticulating group had congregated on the raised cement surface facing me. A burly figure in blue, primitive weapons dangling from his belt, shouldered his way out of the crowd and started rapidly in my direction.

"Hey, you character you," he said (approximately). "Whadaya think this is? Free show? Huh? C'mere!"

As I said, I approximate. I found I was terribly afraid of this savage.

I retreated, whirled and began to run. I heard him running behind me. I ran faster; I heard him do likewise.

"C'mere!" a voice bellowed. "I said c'mere inda name adalaw!"

Was I in an era when the faggot was used on those who ran contrary to the psychotic edicts of society? I couldn't remember. I considered it essential, however, to find the privacy necessary for concentration on my next move.

I found it in a dark corner of an alleyway as I galloped past a building. A large metal receptacle with a cover.

There was no one close to me at the moment. I dodged into the alleyway, removed the cover, jumped into the receptacle and got the cover back over

my head just as my pursuer puffed up.

Such an incredibly barbarous period! That receptacle— Unspeakable, unspeakable. . .

I heard a pair of feet trotting up the alley, coming back. After a while, several more pairs of feet arrived.

"Well, where did he go?"

"S'elp me, sergeant, if he didn't go over that nine foot fence in back there. I coulda sworn he turned in here, coulda sworn!"

"An old guy like that, Harrison?"

"Pretty spry for an old guy, even if he was a gejenerate. Gave me a run."

"Gave you the slip, Harrison. Guy probably took off from some sanitarium or other. Better find him, men, before he terrorizes the neighborhood."

The feet slapped off.

I DECIDED that my temporary escape from capture was balanced by the notice I had attracted in what seemed to be the higher echelons of the city's officialdom. I tried desperately, but futilely, to remember some of my terran history. What were the functions of a sergeant? No use. After all, sixty years since I had studied the subject. . .

Despite my intense olfactory discomfort, I couldn't leave the receptacle. It would be necessary to wait quite a while, until my pursuers had given up the chase; it would also be necessary to have a plan.

Generally speaking, I knew what I must do. I must somehow discover an emissary of the Temporal Embassy and request a return to my own period. Before I could go about finding him, though, I would have to equip myself with such standard equipment as clothes.

How did one go about getting clothes in this period? Barter? Brigandage? Government work-coupons? Weaving them on one's own loom?

Banderling and his idiotic idea that

my specialty would be useful in such a place! That fathead!

The cover of the receptacle lifted suddenly. A very tall young man with a vague and pleasant face stared down at me. He rapped on the metal of the lid.

"May I come in?" he inquired courteously.

I glared up at him, but said nothing.

"The cops are gone, pop," he continued. "But I wouldn't get out just yet. Not in your uniform. I'll lay chick if you tell me all about you."

"Wh—who are *you*? And what do you want?"

"Joseph Burns, a poor but honest newspaperman." He considered for a moment. "Well, poor, anyway. I want any such story as you may have to give. I was in that crowd on the sidewalk when the cop started to chase you. I ambled along behind. You didn't look like the kind of nut who enjoys parading his nakedness in the unsullied streets of our fair city. When I got to the alley, I was too tired to follow law and order anymore. So I took a rest against the wall and noticed the garbage can. *Ecce* you."

I shuffled my feet in the soft, stinking mass, and waited.

"Now, lots of people," he went on, twirling the lid absently and looking down the street, "lots of people would say, 'Joe Burns, what if he isn't a nut? Maybe he just tried to draw to an inside straight in a strip-poker game.' Well, lots of people are sometimes right. But did I or did I not see you materialize out of relatively empty air in the middle of the street? That's what I care about, pop. And if so, how so?"

"What will you do with the information?"

"Depends, pop, depends. If it has color, if it has that cert—"

"For example, if I told you I came

from the future."

"And could prove it? In that case, I would spread your name and photograph across the front page of the lowest, dirtiest, most scandal-mongering sheet in all this wide land. I refer to the eminent journal with which I am associated. Honest, pop, did you come from the future?"

I nodded rapidly and considered. What better way to attract the attention of a temporal emissary than by letting him know through an important public communication medium that I could expose his existence in this era? That I could destroy the secrecy of the Temporal Embassy in a pre-intermediate civilization? I would be sought out frantically and returned to my own time.

Returned to scholarship, to dolik and spindfar, to punforg and the Thumtse Dilemma, to my quiet laboratory and my fascinating paper on *Gllian Origins of Late Pegis Flirg-Patterns...*

"I can prove it," I said swiftly. "But I fail to see the value to you of such a situation. Spreading my name and photograph, as you put it—"

"Don't worry your pretty white thatch about that angle. Joseph Burns will do himself right well with a tabloid tango about a guy from the future. But you have to get out of that delicate den first. And to get you out of it you need—"

"Clothes. How does one get clothes in this period?"

**H**E SCRATCHED his lower lip. "Well, money is said to help. Not crucial, you understand, but one of the more important factors in the process. You wouldn't have a couple of odd bills somewhere? No-o-o, not unless you have an unrevealed marsupiality. I could lend you the money—"

"Well, then—"

"But after all, how much suiting

can be purchased in these inflationary times for a dollar twenty-three? Let's face it, pop: not much. The eagle at my shop doesn't scream until tomorrow. Besides, if Ferguson doesn't see much stink-value in the yarn, I wouldn't even be able to squeeze it onto my swindle sheet. It wouldn't be a good idea to fetch one of my suits down, either."

"Why?" The great quantity of wordage from above and garbage from below were having a very depressing effect on me.

"First, because you might be hauled away by the sanitation department before I returned and converted into hollyhock vitamins. Then, you're somewhat stouter than me and a good deal shorter. You don't want to attract attention when you step out into this cop-infested thoroughfare; and, in my suit, believe me, pop, you would. Add to all this the fact that the brave boys in blue may return at any moment and search the alley again—Difficult situation, pop, most difficult. We face an impasse."

"I don't understand," I began impatiently. "If a voyager from the future appeared in my period, I would be able to help him make the necessary social adjustments most easily. Such a minor item as clothes—"

"Not minor, not minor at all. Witness the ferment in the forces of law and order. Hey! That hammer-shaped ornament, there, the one on your necklace—it wouldn't be silver by any chance?"

Twisting my chin with difficulty, I glanced down. He was pointing at my flirgleflip. I took it off and handed it to him.

"It may well have been silver before it was renucleied for flirgling purposes. Why, does it have any special value?"

"This much silver? I hope to win



the Pulitzer Prize it does. Can you spare it? We can get at least one used suit of clothes and half a drunk out of it."

"Why, I can requisition a new flirgleflip at any time. And I use the large one at the Institute for most of the important flirgling in any case. Take it by all means."

He nodded and replaced the cover of the can over my head. I heard his feet going away. After a lengthy interval in which I developed several very colorful phrases with reference to Banderling, the garbage can cover was lifted again and some garments of crude blue cloth dropped upon my head.

"The pirate in the second-hand store would only allow me a couple of bucks on your gimmick," Burns told me as I dressed. "So I had to settle for work clothes. Hey, button those buttons before you step out. No, these. Button them. Oh—let me."

Having been properly fastened into the garments, I climbed out of the receptacle and suffered the reporter to tie shoes to my startled feet. Shoes—these were the leather bandages I had observed. My fingers itched for a crude flint axe to make the shambling anachronism complete.

Well, possibly not a flint axe. But a weapon like a rifle or crossbow did seem in order. Animal and vegetable fibers all over my skin. Ugh!

Glancing nervously up and down the street, Burns led me by the arm to a badly ventilated underground chamber. There he flailed a path into an extremely long and ugly sectional conveyance—a subway train.

"I see that here, as elsewhere in your society, only the fittest survive."

He got a better grip on one man's shoulders and moved his feet into a more comfortable position on another's

toes. "Howzat?"

"Those who are not strong enough to force their way inside are forced to remain where they are or to resort to even more primitive means of transportation."

"Honest, pop," he said admiringly. "You'll make terrific copy. Remember to talk like that for Ferguson."

After an appreciable interval of discomfort, we emerged from the train—somewhat like two grape pips being expectorated—and clawed our way to the street.

I FOLLOWED the reporter into a building and stopped with him in front of a distinguished old gentleman who sat in a small cubicle wrapped in dignified, thoughtful silence.

"How do you do, Mr. Ferguson?" I began immediately, for I was pleasantly surprised. "I am very happy to find in Mr. Burns' superior the obvious intellectual kinship which I had almost—"

"Lay off!" Burns whispered fiercely in my ear as the old man backed away. "You're scaring the pants off the guy. Fourth floor, Carlo. And don't take pop here seriously. Not yet, anyway."

"Gee, Mr. Burns," Carlo remarked as he pulled a black lever and the cubicle containing the three of us shot upwards, "you sure do come in with characters. What I mean *characters*."

The newspaper office was an impossible melange of darting humanity exhibiting complicated neurosis patterns among masses of paper, desks and primitive typewriters. Joseph Burns placed me on a wooden bench and scurried inside a glass-paneled office after various ritualistic wavings of the arm and crying of such phrases as "hiya tim, hiya joe, whadaya know abe."

After a lengthy period in which I

almost became ill in the atmosphere of perspiration and frenzy, he came out followed by a small man in shirt sleeves who had a tic in his left eye.

"This him?" the small man asked. "Uh-huh. Well, it listens good, I don't say it don't listen good. Uh-huh. He knows the score, huh? He knows he sticks to this future gag no matter how they try to break him down, and, if he does break, nobody's to know we were in on it. He knows it, huh? He looks good for the gag, just old enough, just enough like a crazy prof. It looks good all around, Burns. Uh-huh. Uh-huh, uh-huh."

"Wait till you hear his line," the reporter broke in. "It'll positively make you color-happy. Talk about color, Ferguson!"

"I am unfamiliar with my prismatic possibilities," I told them coldly. But I must own to a great disappointment that the first representative individuals of the pre-intermediate civilization to hear a coherent account of my origin persist in idiotic droolings—"

The small man's left eye rapped out an impatient tic. "Can that free copy. Or save it for Burns: he'll take it down. Listen, Joey boy, we got something good here. Uh-huh. Two days before the world series starts and not a stick of red ink news in the town. And we can let it run all over the front page, more if it bounces up enough argument. I'll take care of the milking—the regulation comments by the university guys and science societies all around your copy. Meanwhile, you haul whozis here—"

"Terton," I told him desperately. "My name, naturally—"

"Terton. Uh-huh. You haul Terton here over to a good hotel, get a decent suite—uh-huh, you can swindle sheet it, Joey boy—and start drag-

ging copy out of him. Keep him isolated until tomorrow morning when there should be a nice thick smell started up. Tomorrow morning, uh-huh. Bring him over again and I'll have a bunch of psychs all ready to swear he's crazy and another bunch crying with tears in their eyes that he's normal and every word sounds like the truth. Get a couple of pics taken of him before you leave."

"Sure, Ferguson. Only trouble, the cop might recognize him as the guy who turned up stark naked in the street. He claims that nobody wears clothes in his period. The police department would have him certified and in Bellevue in no time."

"Lemme think." Ferguson walked around a swift little circle, scratching his nose and winking his eye. "Then we'll play it heavy. For keeps. Uh-huh, for keeps. Find out what he claims his job is—I mean, was—I mean, is going to be—uh-huh, and I'll have a couple of specialists in the same field lined up and insisting that he sounds just like one of them a thousand years from now. 'Swonderful what you can do with the financial resources of a great newspaper behind you."

"Isn't it though?" Burns admitted with a wry grin. "A great molder of public opinion."

"Just a moment," I insisted. "A thousand years is fantas—"

*Tic* went Ferguson's eye. "Get him out of here, Joey boy," he said. "He's your baby. I got work to do."

NOT UNTIL we were in the hotel room was I able to convey to the reporter my extreme disgust at the stolid lunacy of his culture. And his attitude before Ferguson. Why, he had acted as if he shared Ferguson's opinions!

"Take it easy, pop," the young man

told me, his long legs spilling carelessly over the arm of a garishly upholstered couch. "Let us avoid bitterness and reproach. Let us live out our wealthy two days in harmony. Sure, I believe you. But there are certain proprieties to be observed. If Fearful Ferguson suspected that I ever believed anybody, let alone a guy who walks through busy traffic on Madison Avenue with his bare skin hanging out, it would be necessary for me to seek gainful employment not only with another firm, but possibly in another occupation. Besides, all you care about is attracting the attention of one of these temporal emissary queebles. To do that, you feel you have to threaten him with exposure, you have to make a splash. Believe me, pop, with the wire service tie-up we have, you'll make a splash that will moisten the ears of Eskimos fishing peacefully off Greenland. Australian Bushmen will pause between boomerangs to ask each other—'What's with this Terton character?'"

After much reflection, I agreed. As a result of Banderling's fatheaded use of me as a thrown gauntlet, I had to adjust myself to the customs of a ridiculous era. As they say, when in 200 A.D.—

By the time Burns had finished questioning me, I was exhausted and hungry. He ordered a meal sent up, and, despite my repugnance for the badly-cooked meal in unsanitary glazed pottery, I began eating as soon as it was set before me. To my surprise, the taste sensations were rather pleasant.

"You'd better crawl into the sack as soon as you've finished blotting up calories," Burns advised from the table where he was typing. "You look like a hundred-yard-dasher who's just tried to cop the cross-country crown. Bushed, pop, bushed. I'll run the copy

over to the office when I get it done. I don't need you anymore tonight."

"The facts are sufficient and satisfactory?" I yawned.

"Not quite sufficient, but very satisfactory. Enough to give Ferguson a bunch of happy gurgles. I only wish—Oh, well, the date business for example. It would help out a lot."

"Well," I said sleepily, "I can think a bit more about 1993."

"No. We've been through that from every angle. Let it ride. Get yourself some sleep, pop."

The newspaper office had changed its population quality when Burns and I walked in. An entire section of the huge floor had been roped off. Signs had been posted at regular intervals reading "FOR SCIENTISTS ONLY." Between them were other signs extending a welcome to "THE VISITOR FROM 2949," announcing that "*THE NEW YORK BLARE* SALUTES THE FAR FUTURE" and minor obscure comments concerning such things as "HANDS ACROSS THE TIME-STREAM" and "THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE ARE ONE AND INDIVISIBLE WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL!"

Various elderly gentlemen milled about in the roped enclosure into which I was half-jostled, half-guided. What I had come to recognize as flash-bulbs were expended blindly and in quantity by troops of photographers some of whom lay prone on the floor, while others contorted on chairs, and still others hung suspended from trapeze-like affairs attached to the ceiling.

"It's sizzling and bubbling, Joey boy," Ferguson babbled as he writhed his way up to us and put several sheets of ink-fresh newspaper into the reporter's hands. "Some say he's a nut, uh-huh, and some say he's a resurrection of the prophet Nehemiah,

but everybody in town is buying the paper. Two full days before the World Series and we've got a solid newsbeat. The other rags have their tongues hanging out for a look-in—they can kiss my basket. Nice slew of copy, uh-huh, nice angels. I had some trouble finding a couple of archaeologists who'd swear Terton was a member of the guild, but Ferguson never fails—uh-huh."

"An archaeologist?" I demanded. "Did you write that, Burns? I thought I made it clear that I was anything but an archaeologist. And you didn't say I was a *Martian* archaeologist, I hope? Let me see that paper."

FERGUSON'S left eye momentarily lost its tic and developed a positive oscillation. "Look," he growled hoarsely, as he pushed me into a seat, "don't go prima donna on us now. No fancy stuff, see! Uh-huh. That's right. You just stick to your story for today and tomorrow and you'll get yourself a nice hunk of the publisher's dough. If you're good enough, maybe you can even last through the first two games of the Series. Stick to your story—you came from the future, and that's all you know. Uh-huh, and stay away from facts!"

As he clapped his hands, calling the assembled scientists to attention, Joseph Burns slid into the chair next to mine.

"Sorry about the archaeologist complication, pop. But remember my copy is edited thoroughly at this end. What you told me just doesn't look good on paper. Martian archaeologist is close enough for the masses. If I were you, I'd stay away from any detailed description of your occupation. It'll densify the air no end."

"But Martian archaeologist is wholly inaccurate!"

"Come now, pop, you seem to forget that your primary objective is to attract attention, enough attention so that you'll be considered a dangerous big-mouth and sent back to your time. Well, glance to your right and occasionally to your left. Lots of attention, no? This is the way to do it: huge heads and lurid lines."

I was still considering my reply when I noticed that Ferguson had finished introducing me to the scientists, most of whom wore thin little curled smiles. "Uh-huh, and here he is! Terton, the man from the impossibly far future. He will speak to you himself, he will answer your questions. *The New York Blare* requests, however, that questions be brief and limited in number: just for the first day gentlemen. After all, our guest is tired and upset after his long, hazardous journey through time!"

The dignified questions sputtered at me as I rose to my feet. "Exactly *what* year do you claim as your origin, Mr. Terton? Or is the figure 2949 correct?"

"Quite incorrect," I assured the questioner. "The actual date in terms of a translation from the Octet Calendar which *we* use—Now, what was that rule about translating from the Octet?"

"Could you explain the composition of a rocket motor of your period?" someone else asked as I was deep in the complicated and unfamiliar methodology of calendar mathematics. "You speak of interplanetary flight."

"And interstellar flight," I added. "And interstellar flight. Except that rockets are not used. A complicated propulsion method called the space-pressure spread is employed."

"And what exactly is a space-pressure spread?"

I coughed embarrassedly. "Something which, I am afraid, I had never

the slightest interest in investigating. I understand it is based on Kuchholtz' Theory of the Missing Vector."

"And what—"

"Kuchholz' Theory of the Missing Vector," I told them with a good deal of firmness, "has been the one thing that attracted my mind even less than the operation of a space pressure spread."

SO IT WENT. From triviality to triviality. These primitive though well-meaning savants, living as they did at the very dawn of specialization, could not even faintly appreciate how cursory my education had been in everything but my chosen field. In their period of microscopic knowledge and rudimentary operational devices it was already difficult for one man to absorb even a generalization of total learning. How much more so in my time, I tried to tell them, with separate biologies and sociologies for each planet—to mention but one example. And then, it had been so many years since I had touched upon the elementary sciences! I had forgotten so much!

Government (as they called it) was almost impossible to illustrate. How can you demonstrate to twentieth century savages the nine levels of social responsibility with which every child has thoroughly experimented before reaching adolescence? How can you make clear the "legal" status of such a basic device as the judicialation? Possibly someone from my time deeply versed in this period's tribal lore and superstitions might, with the aid of rough parallels, give them a glimmering of such a thing as communal individuality (or mating by neurone-pattern)—but not I. I? Good cause I had to berate Banderling in my mind as the chuckles rippled higher.

"I am a specialist," I cried at them. "I need another specialist like myself to understand me."

"You need a specialist all right," a brown-clothed, middle-aged man said as he rose in the back row. "But not like you. Like Psychiatrist."

There was a roar of agreeing laughter. Ferguson rose nervously and Joseph Burns came quickly to my side.

"This the man?" the psychiatrist inquired of a blue-clad figure who had just entered the office. I recognized my chief pursuer of the day before. He nodded.

"Him, all right. Runnin' around *nood*. Should be ashamed. Or committed. I dunno which, honestly I don't."

"Just a moment," one of the scientists called out as Ferguson cleared his throat. "We've spent this much time: the least we can do is find out what he claims as his specialty. Some form of archaeology—Martian archaeology, no less."

At last. I drew a deep breath. "Not Martian archaeology," I began. "Not archaeology." That had been Banderling's misconception! Behind me, Burns groaned and slumped back into his chair.

"I am a flirgleflip. A flirgleflip is one who flips flirgs with a flirgleflip." There was an intake of breath heard everywhere.

I discussed my profession at great length. How the first dolik and spindfar discovered in the sands of Mars had been considered nothing more than geological anachronisms, how the first punforg had been used a paperweight. Then Cordes and that almost divine accident which enabled him to stumble upon the principle of the flirgleflip; then Gurkheyser who perfected it and may rightly be considered the father of the profession. The vistas that opened as the flirg-patterns

were identified and systematized. The immense beauty, created by a race that even living Martians have no conception of, which became part of man's cultural heritage.

I told of the commonly accepted theory as to the nature of the flirglers: that they were an energy form which at one time attained intelligence on the red planet and left behind them only the flirg-patterns which were vaguely equivalent to our music or non-objectivist art; that being energy forms they left permanent energy records of all kinds in their only material artifacts—dolik, spindfar and punforg. I told proudly of my decision at an early age to dedicate myself to flirg-patterns: how I was responsible for the system of using present-day Martian place-names to identify the sites on which the artifacts were found in their loosely scattered fashion.

THEN, MODESTLY, I mentioned my discovery of an actual contrapuntal flirg-pattern in some dolik—which had resulted in a full Investigatorship at the Institute. I referred to my forthcoming paper on *Gllian Origins of Late Pegis Flirg-Patterns* and became so involved in a description of all the facets of the Thumtse Dilemma, that it seemed to me I was back at the Institute giving a lecture—instead of fighting for my very identity.

"You know," I heard a voice say wonderingly near me. "It almost sounds logical. Like one of those double-talk song hits or the first verse of Jabberwocky, it almost sounds as if it exists."

"Wait!" I said suddenly. "The sensation of flirg-pattern is impossible to describe in words. You must feel it for yourself." I tore open the rough cloth of my upper garment and pulled the necklace out. "Here, examine for yourselves the so-called dolik of the

Thumtse Dilemma with my flirgleflip. Observe—"

I stopped. I was not wearing the flirgleflip! I'd forgotten.

Joseph Burns leaped up. "Mr. Terton's flirgleflip was exchanged for the suit of clothes he is now wearing. I'll volunteer to go out and buy it back."

My gratitude went with him as he picked his way through the amused scientists.

"Listen, guy," Ferguson told me wetly. "You'd better do something fast. Burns isn't a genius: he may not be able to work up a good out. There's an alienist here—uh-huh, an alienist—and they'll shove you behind soft walls if you don't angle something new. You're looking so bad, all our men are sitting on their tongues. They're afraid for their reps."

One of the younger scientists asked for the necklace. I handed it to him, the dolik still attached. He scrutinized both objects, then scratched them with his fingernail. He returned them to me.

"That necklace—ah—was what you claimed could send you or teleport you anywhere on Earth, I believe?"

"Through a benscope," I pointed out. "You need benscope receivers and transmitters."

"Quite. And the small thing is what you call a—hum—a dolik. Thumb-nail's Dilemma, or some such. Gentlemen, I am an industrial chemist, as you know. That necklace, I am convinced—and chemical analysis would merely confirm my experience—is nothing more than a very fine spun glass. Nothing more."

"It's been renucleied for use with a benscope, you fool! What difference does the nature of the material make, when it's been renucleied?"

"Whereas the dolik," the young man went on equably, "the Martian dolik is really a treasure. Something quite

unique. Oh, yes. Old red sandstone such as the average geologist can find in fifteen minutes. Old red sandstone."

It was a while before I could make myself heard again. Unfortunately, I lost my temper. The idiocy implicit in anyone's referring to the Thumtse Dilemma as old red sandstone almost made me insane. I shouted at them for their bigotry, their narrowness, their lack of knowledge.

**F**ERGUSON stopped me. "You'll get yourself put away for sure," he whispered. "You're almost frothing. Uh-huh, and don't think it'll do the sheet a bit of good for you to be dragged out of here in a straitjacket." I took a deep breath.

"Gentlemen," I suggested. "If any of you were suddenly to find yourselves in an earlier century, you would have great difficulty in using your specialized knowledge with the primitive equipment you would then find available. How much more must I—"

"You have a point there," a man with a stout face admitted. "But there is one thing, one means of identification always open to a traveler from the future."

"What's that?" Several academic necks were craned at him.

"Dates. Historical events. Things of this month or this year. The significant occurrences. You claim to regard this period as your past. Tell us of it. What will happen?"

"Unfortunately—" I made an unhappy gesture and the laughter sped forth anew, "my terran history is very fragmentary. One brief course in childhood. I was brought up on Mars, and even Martian history is rather vague to me. Historical dates I never could assimilate. As I told Joseph Burns last night, I remember only three around this general period."

"Yes?" Their interest was now almost tangible.

"First, 1993."

"What happens in 1993?"

"I don't know. But it seems to have some great significance. Possibly a plague, an invention, the date of a masterpiece. Or possibly a date which was mentioned to me casually and which I've retained. Not very useful, in any case. Then August, 1945. The atom bomb. Mr. Burns says this isn't particularly useful either since it is already several years in your past. Please remember, that I have great difficulty with your calendar."

"What's the third date?" a voice called.

"1588," I told him hopelessly. "The Spanish Armada."

Chairs scraped. The scientists rose and prepared to leave. "Hold 'em," Ferguson shrilled at me. "Say something, do something." I shrugged.

"One moment." It was the young industrial chemist. "I think we can settle the hash of this hoax most definitely. I noticed in Mr. Burns' lurid little article that you said you had played on the Martian sands as a child. What were you wearing at the time?"

"Nothing." I was puzzled. "Some warm clothing. Nothing else."

"No helmet of any sort, say?"

"No. None at all."

He grinned. "Just some warm clothing. Yet we know that the temperature at the equator rarely rises above freezing. We also know that there is—practically speaking—no oxygen on Mars. The spectroscope has proven this over the years. Warm clothing, no oxygen helmet. Hah!"

I puzzled after their retreating, contemptuous backs as they left. This was one point I couldn't understand at all. What if their instruments showed

only minute quantities of oxygen on Mars and a temperature below freezing? I had played in the Martian desert as a boy. No oxygen helmet, *some* warm clothing. These savages and their instruments!

"Better scram fast," Ferguson told me, the tic in his left eye batting unhappily. "The cop and the alienist are still out in the corridor. It don't look good for you and it don't look good for the sheet if they wrap you up. Better get out with the service elevator. Uh-huh, the service elevator."

I WENT down to the street, pondering how the temporal emissaries would get in touch with me now. Evidently in Joseph Burns' words, I hadn't made a sufficiently great "splash." Or had it been enough? Possibly one of the scientists was a temporal emissary, observing me and preparing plans to send me back to my own time before I could cause any more disruption in this period.

"Hi, pop. I called the office. Tough go."

"Burns!" I turned in relief to the young man lounging against the wall of the building. The only friend I had made in this crazy, barbaric era. "You didn't get the flirgleflip. They'd bartered it, or sold it or lost it."

"No, pop, I didn't get the flirgleflip." He took my arm gently. "Let's walk."

"Where?"

"Find a job for you, an occupation into which you can fit your futuristic talents."

"And what would that be?"

"That is the problem, the nasty, difficult problem. Not many flirgles to be flipped in this period. That's all you can do well and you're too old to learn another profession. Yet a man must eat. If he doesn't he gets odd feelings and strange, mournful quaverings in

his abdomen. Ah, well."

"Evidently, you were wrong about the temporal emissary."

"No, I wasn't. You attracted their attention. You've been contacted."

"By whom?"

"Me."

I would have stopped in astonishment directly in the path of a scudding vehicle if Burns' pressure on my arm hadn't kept me moving.

"You mean you're a temporal emissary? You take me back?"

"Yes, I'm a temporal emissary. No, I don't take you back."

Completely confused, I shook my head carefully. "I don't—"

"You don't go back, pop. First, because this way Banderling is accused of destroying the right to live of a communal individual—namely you. This way the Institute decides that the radiation depressor will bear years of investigation and development before anything but completely stable individuals are allowed near it. Eventually time-travel will be discovered—and in the proper period—as the result of a textual cross-reference to Banderling's radiation depressor. Second, you don't go back because it is now impossible for you to blab loudly about temporal emissaries without getting into a walled establishment where they make guests wear their sheets like overcoats."

"You mean it was all deliberate, your meeting me and worming the flirgleflip out of my possession and convincing me that I must make a splash, as you put it, so that I am maneuvered into a position where nobody in this society will believe me—"

WE TURNED right down a narrow street of little cafes. "I mean even more than that was deliberate. It was necessary for Banderling to be the kind of person he is—"



"A fathead?" I suggested bitterly.

"—so that the radiation depressor would be put on the shelf a sufficient number of years as a result of the 'Terton Tragedy.' It was necessary for you to have the profession and background you do, completely unfit for the needs of this period, so that you will be able to make no appreciable alteration in it. It was further necessary—"

"I thought you were my friend. I liked you."

"It was further necessary for me to be the kind of person I am so that your confidence would be won by me as soon as you—er, arrived and the project worked properly. Also, being the kind of person I am, I am going to be very uncomfortable at what I did with you. This discomfort is probably also necessary for another facet of the Temporal Embassy's plans. Everything fits, Terton, into everything else—even the temporal embassy at the end of time, I suspect. Our plenum, I'm afraid, is fixed and unalterable. Meanwhile, I had a job to do."

"And Banderling? What happens to him when I fail to return?"

"He's barred from physical research, of course. But since he's young, he will manage to develop a new profession. And since the mores of your era are what they are, he will become

a flirgleflip—replacing you in the community. He will have a Readjustment Course first, however. Which reminds me—I've been concentrating so hard on getting you a job you can do, I forget important things."

I mused on the irony of Banderling's supposed revolt being part of the plans of the Temporal Embassy. And on the pathos of my spending what remained of my lifetime in this insane age. Suddenly I noticed that Burns had detached the dolik from my necklace.

"One of those oversights," he explained as he pocketed it. "You shouldn't have taken it with you, according to our original plans. Now I'll have to see that it's returned as soon as I get you settled in your job. That dolik is the Thumtse Dilemma, you know. The schedule calls for its problem to be solved by one of your colleagues at the Institute."

"Who solves it?" I asked with great interest. "Masterson, Foule, Greenblatt?"

"None of them." He grinned. "According to the schedule, the Thumtse Dilemma is solved finally by Thomas Alva Banderling."

"Banderling," I cried as we paused in front of a grimy restaurant which had a *Dishwater Wanted* sign in the window. "Banderling? That fathead?"

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

## THE SHADES OF TOFFEE

By Charles F. Myers

This is really big news for all readers of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES! At long last Charles F. Myers has written a novel-length story of the most popular character ever to grace the pages of your favorite magazine—the inimitable "Toffee". You'll thrill to the hilarious adventures of Marc Pillsworth and his saucy dream-girl come to life. And you'll meet two sinister little men who aspire to wreck the world—for a very peculiar reason! This is a great novel, in the true Thorne Smith tradition. Be sure and reserve your copy!

# SPAWN of DARKNESS

*By Craig Browning*

"OH, GOD!" Joe gasped. The pencil-thick, mile long beam from the enemy mobile synchrotron was cutting through the advancing line. It moved up and down so that it couldn't be escaped even by leaping or by dropping prone. There were no depressions or foxholes,

for possible sanctuary either.

No escape.

Joe looked at the men running on either side of him. Their sweat and dirt streaked faces showed no expression other than fatigue. They weren't men, but automatons, one eye on that inexorable pencil of terrible energy



Over his head, the two beams of force met in a blinding flash of radiance . . .

**One moment he was in the center of a terrible battle, the next he had vanished from sight. Had the darkness claimed him?**

moving toward them, the other on the ground ahead of them where they would pass.

But a fierce, glad light appeared in the eyes of one of them. Joe followed his gaze. One man, by some miracle, had dodged the beam. He had leaped right and ducked right—and avoided it.

Envy suddenly settled into Joe's mind. He wouldn't be that lucky. In another few seconds now—

He risked a glance ahead at the low lying hills where the enemy tanks with their synchrotrons were coming forward. They were absolutely impregnable, except to another of their kind. Those terrible pencils of energy, of

electrons travelling at two-thirds of the speed of light, up to almost the full speed of light. The mass of an electron was supposed to increase with its speed, so that the ones going at almost the speed of light had masses up in the ounces, instead of ten or more points to the right of the decimal point.

Nothing could stop them and survive. They disintegrated the very atmosphere. Where one hit into the soil it left a thin, slate-like slab of fused stuff. Where one passed across the face of foot thick armor plate, it left a crumbling mortar of stuff that had been mostly iron molecules, but was no longer.



Where one cut through a living body it divided it into two halves that were crusted over with a dry, crisp shell. They said you didn't feel it when it happened to you. You just heard your upper half settling onto your lower half like two leaves rattling together. Then you tumbled forward. You didn't even die, at first. You just lay there, knowing that from the waist on down was nothing. Sometimes it took hours to die.

And this senseless charging against those moving fortresses—some arm-chair brass-hat back home who didn't know what it was about was responsible for that.

What good would it do to reach those tanks, those moving behemoths? No sense to it.

Suddenly the landscape jumped crazily.

"This is it," Joe said with his lips. He was falling forward. He saw the dirt and grass rushing toward his face. He dropped his gun and tried to ward off the blow with his hands.

All sorts of strange and painful sensations were coming from his legs—not his legs, but the severed and baked nerve endings of his spinal cord.

"It's a peculiar experience," he was thinking now. "Too bad I can't live long enough to write it all out."

It was getting dark. It was hard to breathe. Instinctively Joe clawed at the dirt to roll over. He succeeded, and in doing so he made a startling, hair-raising discovery.

He still had his legs. They had helped him turn over.

He lay there, his thoughts a storm of conflicting thoughts, feelings, and emotions, looking upward at the small jagged circle of sky.

And finally he knew what had happened. He had fallen through the flimsy roof of some dugout.

At that moment he was quite unbalanced.

And at that moment one of the mobile synchrotrons of his own side swung into action, its pencil thick beam a bright sword.

Joe watched it as it appeared over the hole he had made in the earth with his fall. It moved into view and paused. Then another moved into view.

He didn't know it, but what was about to happen had only one chance in countless billions of taking place. The two beams of electrons met. At the instant they met they destroyed each others' generating units. That was to be expected.

But also, just above the jagged hole in the ground, two electrons met in head-on flight, at a relative speed almost twice that of light.

**I**N THE PARLANCE of modern nuclear physics, each of the two electrons was an imaginary positron to the other, striking it at twice light speed. Perhaps no scientist could possibly iron out the contradictions actually involved in that meeting. The simple fact remains that at one instant there were two electrons, and the next instant there was—*something else*.

Perhaps Nature herself was not equipped to cope with the contradictions of that meeting. In the frame of reference which had Joe for its rest point, the two electrons had had infinite mass. Or as near to that as could be attained. And they were mutually imaginary in their own frames. It may be that this mutual imaginariness reached a compromise in the common frame; the *something else* that resulted was neither real nor imaginary, but in an extra-cosmic way, both.

To Joe, one minute the two pencil beams of energy were coming together over the hole, against the background of the sky. The next minute they were gone, and a transparently black

*something* hovered motionless, one smoky tendril drifting downward into his tomb-like pit.

It meant nothing to him. His raw dry mouth did. He needed a drink. He wanted a drink. The wish is father of the act. He reached to his belt for the small canteen of water.

The transparently black tendril beat his hand to it, wrapping itself around the cloth covered canteen. Unbelievably he saw a finger tendril split from the rest and unfasten it from his belt.

The canteen rose with the arm of black smoke and tipped to his lips. He drank a little and spit the rest out, rinsing the dust from his mouth.

"Being crazy is fun," he decided gravely. Pasting a silly grin on his dirt-streaked face, he looked at the transparently black wisp that had picked up the canteen and said, "If you're going to be an arm and hand with fingers, why not look like one?"

A sentient black intelligence seemed to course through the ghostly black transparency, swirling it. It became a muscular arm ending in a perfectly formed hand with four fingers and a thumb. It lost its transparent quality and became opaque, covered by a glistening black skin. The fingers flexed gracefully. The upper arm merged into the black transparency hovering outside.

Joe looked at the arm critically. Its black was the most peculiar black he had ever seen. Its sheen seemed to come, not from reflection, but from inner luminescence. There seemed to be lack of reflection from it in a cosmically absolute sense of the word.

It was like—was like—Joe tried to form a mental image of what it was like. It was like ordinarily the eyes leaned against the light, and with this black arm there was nothing for the eye to lean against. That was it, even though its skin glistened.

"Sooo..." Joe said softly, an intense satisfaction in his voice. He wiped his face with his sleeve and stood up. Glancing around, he saw that he was in a rather large make-shift cave. It might even be called a pitfall. Its roof was merely thin logs covered with dirt.

Joe glanced back at the arm. It was still obediently poised, hanging from the jagged hole in the roof. That irritated him.

"If you're going to have an arm," he said, "why don't you come down and finish the body."

He watched as the arm dropped lazily, followed by a swirling, ever more solid stream of transparent black. He watched as it took form. And he realized finally that its form-making was slow and questioning, that its shape was conforming to his criticism, unvoiced.

Finally it was complete. There was something strangely familiar about it. What was it? A memory rose in his mind of an illustration in an oriental book of a genii standing before a man. The genii had been about ten feet tall, slightly fat, especially in the face, jet black of skin, with a colorful costume and huge white turban.

That memory was what the stuff had conformed to. It had reached into his mind and shaped itself from the pattern of his own thoughts! What manner of stuff was it? There seemed no answer.

"Do you know what you are?" Joe asked.

"I am the genii, master," the giant turbaned figure intoned—and again Joe knew it had plucked its very words from his mind. Even so, its lips moved normally, and Joe had a feeling that each thing the genii sensed, it hung onto. Next time it said that, it would do so from its own memory. The next, it would take the shape it had at this moment.

**N**OW, SUDDENLY, the ground under Joe's feet was trembling. He knew what it meant. The mobile fortresses with their synchrotrons were advancing. He looked around his prison with a new comprehension. This was a pit designed to trap one of those huge tanks. At any minute one might plunge in on him.

"Get me outta here!" he said urgently.

"Where do you wish to go, master?" the genii asked.

"Take me home," Joe said. "Yes, that's it. Take me home to good ol' Moab, Washington, America!"

The genii picked Joe up and cradled him in his arms. For an instant Joe had a strange impression of being lost in a choking sea of black.

He gasped for breath. Then, as suddenly, he was inhaling deep lungs full of fresh mountain air. Black arms were setting him gently on the ground. Familiar Pines were scattered here and there. In the distance was the snow-capped Mount Spokane, unmistakable.

The genii straightened up and folded its arms, its huge white turban looming twelve feet above the ground, its fat black face serenely expressionless.

"Well, well, well, we did it," Joe said, his voice hysterically thin.

Fifty feet away was the road. It was familiar. Joe had played in this very field many times, and every square foot of it was familiar.

"I can visit the folks!" he said. "And my girl friend!" He looked at the giant genii thoughtfully. "But I gotta hide you some way."

His eyes dropped to the water canteen hanging at his belt. Geniis were supposed to be kept in jugs. Maybe it would do.

He emptied out the water and set the empty stainless steel covered with

canvas canteen on the ground and stepped back. There was doubt in his voice as he ordered the genii to enter it.

The genii's giant bulk slowly lost its shape. A thin tendril of black transparency drifted down to the neck of the canteen, and entered it. Slowly the rest followed, until there was no sign of the genii or the blackly transparent haze.

"Are you all in?" Joe asked thinly.

"Yes, master," a deep voice intoned from the canteen.

Joe snapped the cap on it and fastened it to his belt again. It seemed no heavier than it would have, filled with water. That was surprising, considering that it now contained what had been a ten or twelve-foot solid giant. But by now Joe was completely immune to surprises.

He patted the canteen, and realized he had been a little afraid of the genii. Now it couldn't come out until he took off the cap and let it. Everything was under control.

Whistling happily, he went to the road and started toward home. His trench helmet was caked with dust. His face was streaked with dirt. His rifle was strung over his shoulder. His uniform was dirty and ripped from his fall into the tank trap. And the canteen containing the genii swung against his hip at every step.

The house came into view. He pushed open the gate and walked up the path, circling the house to the back door. Odors of home cooking wafted—literally wafted—through an open kitchen window to his nostrils.

He bounded up the back steps and flung open the door. His mother was kneading dough on a breadboard on the table. She looked up.

"Mom!" Joe shouted. Then they were in each other's arms.

TWO WEEKS passed. They were wonderful weeks for Joe, but also weeks during which he found time to worry occasionally. It would have been quite all right for him to have been killed back there on the battlefront. Being home was something else. He could be court-martialed and shot for it.

However, he didn't worry too much. As his mother had often said, "My Joe isn't one to worry about things."

The canteen containing the genii lay in one corner on a shelf in his clothes closet, almost forgotten. The rationalizing processes of Joe's mind were already making him doubt that there was a genii in it.

He was even beginning to half believe the lies he had distributed on every hand of getting a leave to come home. Margie, his girl friend, had welcomed him with open arms. They had been two wonderful weeks for her, the only girl in town to have her sweetheart home.

No one questioned his being home. And if his mother sometimes wore a troubled look as she recalled his appearance when he had first stood in the kitchen doorway, an appearance more in keeping with a man fresh off the battlefield than one fresh off the train, she kept her thoughts to herself. It was enough for her that he was home.

Then came the night that she woke up with the feeling that some *presence* was in the house. Not able to go back to sleep, she finally arose and stole softly into the hall. There was a light under Joe's door. She placed her ear against the panel, not to snoop, but to see if he was all right.

Through the flimsy thickness of the door panel came the sounds of two voices, one Joe's, the other belonging to a stranger...

The genii sneezed.

"I didn't know you could catch cold," Joe said.

"Two weeks in that damp jug would give the cork the sniffles," the genii replied.

"It's all in your mind," Joe replied. "You're just aping me. I'd catch cold and sneeze, so you do. You don't have to, you know."

"I don't?" the genii interrupted a sneeze to say. And it was his last sneeze. But it had planted an idea in its complex that was to become the foundation of something.

"The reason I called you out," Joe said, getting down to cases, "was because I want to pull a little magic stuff at a shindig I'm going to tomorrow night."

"I am yours to command, master," the genii intoned.

... Joe's mother stole softly back to bed, but not to sleep. When the sun came up a few hours later she was staring dry-eyed at the ceiling.

The alarm clock clicked, preparing to sound off. She shut it off and rose.

She felt very much alone this morning. It was one of the times she wished Joe's father was still alive. If he had been there she could have told him her troubles.

"Aw now, ma," he would have said. "Tain't nothing to bother about. It'll all come out." And she would have felt better.

Mechanically she went about the morning tasks. Getting the cookstove fire going, milking the cow, feeding the chickens and the pig she was raising on account of meat rationing, and gathering the precious eggs.

When she returned to the kitchen the teakettle was singing its morning welcome. The heat of the stove had spread a cozy warmth throughout the room.

Almost cheerful, she started to break the usual four eggs in the fry-

ing pan, two for her and two for Joe. Then she put two of them back in the bowl. She would let Joe sleep.

It was a lonely breakfast for her. There had been two years of lonely breakfasts for her while Joe was overseas, but none of them had been quite so lonely as this one, with him asleep upstairs.

She forced herself to eat her normal breakfast. She listened to the radio, her face occasionally almost cracking a smile at some joke of the irrepressible disc jockey.

It was nine o'clock before she finished and started to do up the dishes. She ran the hot water over the soap powder in the dishpan, swishing it around with her hands, letting the clean suds pop against her arms.

The front doorbell rang. She hastily wiped her hands and arms on a towel, shut off the hot water, and went to answer its call.

A small old man in a Western Union uniform stood on the front porch. He handed her a telegram, holding out his book and pencil. She signed with shaking fingers.

She closed the door and went back to the kitchen and sat down at the table, the unopened telegram in her fingers. She looked at it. The envelope had a dark border around its edge. She had never received a telegram before in her life. But somewhere in her memory was tucked away a fragment of conversation about telegrams announcing a death having such a black border.

Before she opened it she knew what it would say. It informed her of the fact that her son, Joe Ryan, was missing in action and presumed to be dead.

For a long time she sat there motionless, her eyes blank. Then she carefully folded the telegram and put it in her purse laying on the window-

ledge. After that she began washing the dishes.

\* \* \*

THE CARDBOARD sign tacked on the door said *Madama Ona*, and was followed by an enigmatic "Readings". The room on the other side of the door had succeeded in attaining an inexpensive atmosphere of authentic *Mystery*.

That *Madame Ona's* name by birth was *Ludwiga Krakovitsch*, that she had been born in Brooklyn, and that she had five minutes before finished hanging out her weekly wash, were by no means to be construed as subtracting from the very real value of her advice, nor as evidence that the spirits that came at her bidding were not genuine.

The gypsy robe hastily flung over her soapsuds dampened housedress and the shawl flung over her uncombed hair were more than enough to make *Mrs. Ryan* nod her head imperceptibly with relief and satisfaction, when viewed above the crystal ball resting on a black plush pillow, and the well worn tarot cards strewn over the surface of the table.

"Yes?" *Madame Ona* said, with just the lift to make it neither a question nor a statement.

"It's about my son Joe," *Mrs. Ryan* said, plunging herself into the chair opposite *Madame Ona* and opening her purse.

Her trembling fingers drew out the folded telegram. *Madame Ona's* experienced eyes took in the black border of the envelope.

"Ah, yes, your son Joe," she intoned. When *Mrs. Ryan* opened her mouth to speak, she held up her hand to silence her, then raised her head and held her other hand over her eyes, as though communing with the spirits. "I see him," she intoned. "He's on the battlefield. There are many



dead around him. And he has fallen too. Yes, he had been killed in battle." She opened her eyes and looked closely at Mrs. Ryan, deciding rightly that there was little money here, and nobly that there was a real need of moral assistance beyond the call of money. She continued in a more practical tone. "You came here to see if I could contact the spirit of your son so you can find out if he's all right where he is?"

"Oh, no," Mrs. Ryan said. "You see, he's home, and he's very happy."

"Then he isn't dead!" Madame Ona said, a flash of anger at having been tricked in her dark eyes.

"Yes, he's dead," Mrs. Ryan said. "That's why I came to see you."

"Oh, I see," Madame Ona said, only feebly trying to make her voice all knowing. She looked at Mrs. Ryan queerly.

"You see," Mrs. Ryan went on eagerly, taking the telegram out of its envelope and spreading it on the table. "It says he was killed in action overseas on March fourteenth, and that was when he came home, his uniform torn, a freshly bleeding scratch on his leg, his face dirty and tired, but happy and smiling in spite of it."

"But the telegram is undoubtedly a mistake," Madame Ona said, more to herself than to her client. "No doubt there is more than one Joseph Ryan, and they got them mixed up."

"No," Mrs. Ryan said flatly. "There's something else I haven't dared to tell anybody."

She reached into her purse once more and drew out a letter of the type telephotoed from army bases overseas. Madame Ona took it and looked at the datemark. It was dated March thirteenth.

"Your son is an officer?" she asked sharply.

"No, just a private first class," Mrs. Ryan said.

"I see," Madame Ona said, licking dry lips. Behind her calm front she was beginning to regret her choice of vocation. At long last it had come, the genuine supernatural case; for it was obvious that no Private first class would be given leave to come all the way home in the first place, with the war going so badly, and in the second place he could not have arrived home the day after he wrote a letter overseas, even though he had. In the third place, if he had, he wouldn't have arrived in a torn uniform and with dirt on his face, and a fresh cut on his leg.

A word rose in her mind, but she didn't utter it aloud. That word was *poltergeist*, and it denoted a spirit of the dead who materialized and went around as if still alive, and didn't even know it was dead.

"TELL ME everything, Mrs. Ryan," Madame Ona said crisply. "Don't leave out anything."

Mrs. Ryan took her at her word, even to the extent of going back into Joe's childhood to bring out various points.

"So you had a feeling even when you first saw him standing in the doorway to the kitchen with his field uniform on that it wasn't really him, but his ghost?" Madame Ona asked at one point.

"Yes," Mrs. Ryan said. "And when the letter came a week ago I looked at the date the very first thing, and then I knew."

"Why didn't you come to me then?" Madame Ona asked.

"Because he was so happy," Mrs. Ryan said.

"Isn't he still happy?" Madame Ona persisted.

"Yes," Mrs. Ryan said. "But after what happened last night I'm afraid."

"Oh," Madame Ona said. "Now we

come to it. What happened last night?"

"It was that other voice in his room," Mrs. Ryan said. "The one that called him 'Master'."

"Oh?" Madame Ona said, pricking up her ears. "What did this other voice say? And did you see—*what* it belonged to?"

"It was in his room with him," Mrs. Ryan said. "I didn't dare open the door to see. But Joe said, as nearly as I can remember, 'I called you out because I want to pull a little magic stuff tonight.' And this—whatever it was, said, 'I am yours to command, Master.'"

"Oh, it did, did it," Madame Ona said quietly. "And what happened?"

"Nothing yet," Mrs. Ryan said. "Joe meant tonight, when he's having his girlfriend and some others over for a little party."

"Then the thing to do is to be there tonight and see what happens," Madame Ona said reluctantly.

"Oh, could you?" Mrs. Ryan said eagerly. "How much—that is, it wouldn't cost too much?"

"You can pay me five dollars now," Madame Ona said, her professional greed getting the best of her for the moment. "We'll talk about the rest later."

"Oh, thank you so much," Mrs. Ryan said gratefully. "If you can bring Joe's spirit to rest money couldn't possibly compensate for it." She took a worn five dollar bill out of her purse and gave it to Madame Ona. "Now, the way you get out to our place..."

She was still thanking Madame Ona when the door closed on her. When she was gone Madame Ona shed her cloak and shawl and became herself, Ludwiga Krakovitsch. Locking the door, she went to the phone. Shortly she was connected with the phone

of a very scholarly looking gentleman of her acquaintance.

"Listen, Dr. Wright," she said, her voice low-pitched and eager. "Is that ten thousand dollars for a genuine supernatural manifestation still unclaimed? Well listen. I have what I'm convinced is a poltergeist. If you're free this evening, and can bring some witnesses along with you, I think I can lay claim to that money. You are? Good! You can pick me up at eight o'clock. G'bye."

"**N**OW REMEMBER," Joe said firmly. "You are to remain invisible unless I order you to appear. You are to do everything I tell you to do while you're invisible. Also you might think of a few harmless tricks to do yourself."

"Your wishes are my commands, Master," the genii intoned, its giant fat face glistening blackly under its enormous white turban, its large hands folded together at the sash across the waist of its gaudy oriental costume.

Joe clapped his hands once, sharply. The genii vanished in a puff of smoke in the best of traditional manner. Joe nodded his satisfaction with the performance, opened the door, and went downstairs.

"Hi, Margie," he greeted the smiling blonde that watched him from the foot of the stairs as he came down. He took her in his arms casually. They kissed, then separated until only the fingers of one hand joined them affectionately. And on one finger of Margie's hand was a modest diamond.

"Guess everybody's here," Joe said, surveying the crowd sprawled around the living room.

"Not everybody yet," Mrs. Ryan said from the kitchen. "A friend of mine you haven't met yet is coming over with a couple of friends. You don't mind, do you, Joe?"

"Of course not," Joe said. "The more the merrier." He grinned at his inner secret. Then he fixed his eyes sternly on Freddy Blish, Margie's fourteen year old brother. "Freddy, where is your cap supposed to be put when you come into the house?"

"In the hall," Freddy said, "where it is right now."

"Is it?" Joe asked sinisterly. "What's that on your head?"

Every eye turned to Freddy as he raised his hand to his head. One instant there was nothing there but his shock of unruly hair. Just before his hand reached it, a cap suddenly materialized on his head.

The look on his face was quite ludicrous as he slowly took the hat off. Everyone was laughing a trifle hysterically, trying to deny in their minds that they had actually seen the hat materialize out of nothing.

"Hey! This isn't my cap!" Freddy said triumphantly. "It's Jim my Green's."

"Yeah, that's mine!" Jimmy said.

"Guess I slipped up there," Joe said with a superior smile. "Just a little trick I picked up overseas before I came home."

"You're wonderful," Margie took the opportunity to say. "How'd you do it?"

"Very simple," Joe said. "I just—"

The doorbell interrupted him.

"That must be Ona," Mrs. Ryan said, emerging from the kitchen and hurrying across the living room to the front hall. Everyone in the room was in a state of suspended animation, waiting for the newcomers to enter.

They were a rather beautiful woman in her late forties with dark brown skin and a slightly foreign look about her, a rather professorish man with neatly combed gray hair, and a wide-faced dreamy looking man of forty with thin black hair.

"This is my son, Joe," Mrs. Ryan

said. "Joe, this is Ludwiga Krakovitsch. (Madame Ona had whispered the name at the front door.) And this is Dr. Wright and Mr. Chad, her friends."

"Glad to meet you," Joe said, smiling. "May I take your wraps?"

"Why, yes," Dr. Wright said. He had his topcoat half off when it vanished from his grasp and from about his form. In the same instant it was draped across Joe's arm.

There were nervous titters from Joe's friends at the surprised look on Dr. Wright's face.

"Just a little trick I picked up overseas," Joe explained. He stepped around Dr. Wright and hung the coat in the hall.

DR. WRIGHT exchanged meaningful glances with Madame Ona, Mr. Chad, and Mrs. Ryan. Madame Ona nodded wisely. For an instant Mrs. Ryan's face was haggard, then it resumed its too bright smile once more.

Joe appeared from the hall and took the other wraps in the normal way. Then he made introductions.

"This is my fiance, Margie Blish," he said. "Her brother Freddy, Janie Ingram, Mary Blake, Beth Johnson, Jimmy Green, and Janie's brother, George Ingram."

There were awkwardly polite handshakes.

Madame Ona turned to Joe after completing the amenities and looked him up and down, a dry good humor showing on her face.

"My," she said. "You're more solid looking than I had thought you would be from your mother's description of you."

"That's 'cause he's a solid citizen," Jimmy Green wisecracked. He added a weak, "Ha ha," then pretended to be sick over his own joke.

Dr. Wright now turned his attention to Joe also. Fixing his bifocals more

firmly on his nose, and lifting his head to peer through the bottom lenses, he felt of Joe's arm experimentally, squeezing it firmly several times.

"Remarkable," he murmured, turning his head to Madame Ona. "I would never have believed it possible." Still holding Joe's bicep he turned to Mr. Chad. "Here," he commanded. "Feel of him."

Mr. Chad approached Joe with fear in his eyes. He squeezed Joe's shoulder as though he were ready to jump back at the slightest move. Then he shook his head and said, "Chk chk chk chk. Unbelievable."

"Say," Joe said laughingly, "what is this? A gag?"

"No, my boy," Dr. Wright said, a tragic look on his face. "We're here to help you. Please believe me. Just to help you. Nothing more."

"He—he wants to help me!" Joe said to his friends. He laughed hollowly, then swallowed loudly. While his friends laughed uneasily, he ran a finger around inside his collar nervously.

"We *all* want to help you," Madame Ona said seriously.

"What is this?" Joe said. "Mom, what have you been saying to these people?"

"Nothing, Joe," Mrs. Ryan said, blushing.

"Well—" Joe looked vaguely around. "I'll start my show. Freddy!" He fixed a stern eye on Margie's brother. "You're to be my assistant."

"Sure," Freddy said, winking at Jimmy and George to let them know he would try his best to gum things up. "What do you want me to do?"

"Lay down flat on your back on the floor," Joe said. To the others, "This will be an experiment in levitation. I'll try to raise Freddy off the floor without any human hands touching him at any time."

Freddy had plopped to the floor. Now he suddenly rose to a height of

five feet, his body rigidly extended.

"Not yet, Freddy," Joe said with mock disgust. "I've got to hypnotize you first."

"Ow!" Freddy had dropped back to the floor with a thump. He started to get up. An unseen force pushed him back down. "Lemme up!" he shouted.

"What's the matter, scared?" George Ingram said in a mixture of fear and derision.

"Yah, you take my place if you're so brave," Freddy said. And instantly it was George on the floor, and Freddy was sitting where George had been.

Joe blinked his eyes in partly feigned surprise.

"You kids can sure move fast," he said.

Freddy and George were too dazed by their sudden change to answer.

"Hmmm," Dr. Wright said, leaning forward. "Most remarkable."

"*Most* remarkable," Mr. Chad agreed.

"*Quite* remarkable," twelve year old Jimmy Green said, looking at Dr. Wright owlishly. Dr. Wright frowned, suspecting the youngster was making fun of him.

Mrs. Ryan had been standing in the kitchen doorway during this performance. Now Madame Ona rose impulsively and went to her, putting her arms around her.

"Oh, my dear," Madame Ona said. "I'm so sorry for you." Mrs. Ryan broke into sobs, burying her head in Madame Ona's hair.

"What the heck's the matter with you, mom?" Joe asked, bewildered.

"Nothing, son," Mrs. Ryan said, straightening bravely. "Nothing."

"Ahem!" It was Dr. Wright clearing his throat importantly. "My boy—Joe, would you care to tell us how it happened?"

"How what happened?" Joe asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

At that moment the doorbell rang again, startlingly shrill.

**J**OE ANSWERED the door. There were two uniformed policemen standing on the porch. Down in the street was a radio prowler car with another policeman at the wheel. And standing on the steps was a bareheaded man whom Joe recognized as a man living a couple of blocks away.

"That's him!" the man on the steps said angrily.

"What was the idea of throwing rocks at this man and chasing him home, and breaking windows in his house?" one of the policemen demanded.

"What!" Joe exclaimed. "Is somebody crazy? I didn't do any such thing!"

"Yes you did!" the man said. "Don't try to lie out of it."

"You're the liar," Joe said. Then, to the policemen, "Just when was this supposed to happen?"

"Just ten minutes ago," one of them growled.

"Hah!" Joe said triumphantly. "I was here all the time and I have a dozen witnesses to prove it!" He stepped aside so the policemen could look into the living room and see.

"Is that right?" the policeman asked. There were several slow nods from the tight-lipped people in the living room. He turned to the bareheaded man on the step. "Better run along home and forget it," he growled.

"Like heck I will," the man said hotly. "I guess I know Joe when I see him, and it was Joe."

"Gowan," the other policeman said gently pushing the man down the steps.

Joe stared at their departing figures for a moment, then closed the door.

"Let's see now," he said cheerfully.

"Where were we? Oh yes, George." He leaned over and made passes over George's head. "You are growing sleepy," he said. "Sleeeeepy. . ."

George closed his eyes and started to breathe deeply.

"Now," Joe said softly. He placed his hands above George's middle, fingers dangling, and raised his arms in a pulling effect. George rose slowly, with nothing touching him. He rose until he was three feet off the floor.

The doorbell rang again, breaking into the quiet concentration in the room like a charge of exploding dynamite. It was followed abruptly by the thump of George's stiff form hitting the floor.

"Damn!" Joe said angrily, striding to the door and throwing it open.

The two policemen were there again, this time with ugly looks on their faces.

"Wise guy, huh?" one of them said. They pushed him ahead of them as they entered the room.

"What do you mean?" Joe asked.

"Don't say you didn't throw a rock through our windshield," he said. "We saw you as plain as day."

"I haven't been out of the house," Joe said. "It must be somebody who looks like me."

"Yeah?" the policeman growled.

"Will all of you people swear he was here all the time and couldn't have thrown a rock through our windshield?" the other policeman said, looking around. He caught sight of George, lying stiffly on the floor. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's hypnotized," Joe said. "Wake up, George!" He snapped his fingers and George opened his eyes.

"Now then," the policeman said, glancing doubtfully at George. "Was this guy in here all the time?"

"Yes," a chorus of voices answered.

"Then it couldn't have been him," the policeman muttered, turning to-

ward the front hall.

"Ahhh," Dr. Wright said arrestingly. "I would say, officer, that he *could* have done it."

"Huh?" the policeman said, he and his partner turning back into the room. "Then he wasn't here all the time?"

"Oh yes," Dr. Wright said smugly. "May I talk to you two men alone?" He glanced at Joe pityingly. "I don't think *he* should become upset—just yet."

"Sure," the policeman said. "We'll step out on the porch."

Mrs. Ryan was sobbing again against Madame Ona's dandruff-flecked black hair. Mr. Chad was gazing at the rug intently. Joe's friends were watching the policemen and Dr. Wright with mystified expressions.

Joe looked about at all of them with a mixture of feelings, not knowing what to think at being, on the one hand, accused of things he couldn't possibly do, and, on the other hand, treated like something was radically wrong with him.

Now, as the front door closed quietly and sinisterly on the backs of Dr. Wright and the two policemen, he thought of something terrible. If the cops took his name and did any checking, they'd find he was a.w.o.l. from the battlefield!

"**N**OW THEN," one of the policemen growled when they and Dr. Wright were in the darkness of the porch. "What's this about he could have done it?"

"You see, officer—heh heh—I know it will be hard to believe—" Dr. Wright paused dramatically. "The truth is, that Joseph Ryan is dead."

"That's too bad," the policeman murmured sympathetically. "But what's that got to do with this? And who's Joseph Ryan? That guy's father?"

"I don't know," Dr. Wright said.

"His father may be dead. No no. You don't understand. The man you accuse of having broken your windshield, and whom the bareheaded man accused of chasing him and breaking the windows of his house—a typical phenomenon with poltergeists, by the way—is dead. It isn't him. It's his materialized spirit in there."

"No," the two policemen breathed with exaggerated pretense at belief.

"I know it's impossible," Dr. Wright said, feeling more confident of himself. "But it's the truth. He died March fourteenth, on the warfront in Europe. The same day this—apparition that seems to be him—appeared here at home."

"Who did you say you were?" one of the policemen asked innocently.

"Dr. Wright," Dr. Wright said, annoyed at this sudden shift of thought. "You may have heard of me. I'm a noted authority on supernatural phenomena."

"And you say this lad, Joe Ryan, is a soldier, and was overseas on the fourteenth, and is here now—in there?"

"That's what I said," Dr. Wright said, mistaking the trend of the questions.

"Well," the policeman said, feeling he had something he could sink his teeth into now, "That means he's either a.w.o.l. or he had his papers giving him a leave. We'll check on it. Let's go back in."

"But—" Dr. Wright protested. He followed them back into the house with a feeling that he had made no impression on them at all.

"You, Joseph Ryan," the policeman said, trying to sound very formal as a representative of the law. "Let's see your draft card, service card, leave card, and whatever papers you have to prove you're home within the law."

Not only the policeman, but Joe's friends, read the expression that came to his face.

"Joe!" Margie, his fiance, gasped incredulously. "Don't tell me your papers aren't in order!"

"Now just a minute," Joe said, backing up from the slowly advancing policemen. "Take it easy for a minute and I'll explain everything. I know I don't have my leave papers, but there's a very good reason why I don't—if you'll let me explain."

"Yes," Madame Ona spoke up, glancing reassuringly at Joe's mother. "I'm sure there is a very good reason why you can't arrest Joe. Please, officers, be seated and give us a chance to help Joe straighten it out in his own way."

THE TWO officers looked at her, then at Dr. Wright who nodded with voiceless firmness.

"Well..." one of them said. They sat down, defeated for the moment.

"First I'll explain the tricks I've been doing here," Joe began.

"No, Joe," Dr. Wright said firmly. "Go back to the beginning. You were on the battlefield. You were advancing against the enemy. Then?"

"Say!" Joe said in surprise. "You sound just like you know all about me."

"Perhaps I know more than you think," Dr. Wright said gently. "Was it a machine gun nest?"

"No," Joe said, his eyes going dreamy. "It was the new synchrotron mobile units. They had caught us by surprise in the middle of a charge. It was a trap, I guess. Our planes reported the retreat of the enemy from their forward emplacements, apparently abandoning them because we were so close. We were ordered to advance and occupy them. We were about two-thirds of the way over the open field when the tanks, lying in wait, simply moved out from under their camouflage and went into operation. Their electron beams were mowing everyone

down along the entire line—except one guy that they missed. He was going forward all alone in his sector. I saw it coming. That pale pencil beam. It was jumping around so it couldn't miss. It was just a few feet away. It was cutting through the guy next to me."

"What happened then, Joe," Dr. Wright said softly, his words sounding overlaid in the hush of the room. "Please try to remember *very carefully*. Every detail."

"Ha! Will I ever forget any of it!" Joe said lightly. "Maybe I closed my eyes. I don't know. I knew it was coming. I couldn't avoid it. I felt myself falling. I knew there wouldn't be any pain to it. I landed with my face in the dirt. I knew that a lot of them, when they got it from those beams, lived for as long as an hour or so afterward, fully conscious—depending on where the beam cut them in two."

"As I said, I was falling. I landed with my face in the dirt. Then I turned over. I was in a dark place."

"Ah, yes," Dr. Wright said. "A dark place."

"A tank trap," Joe added. "About fifteen feet over my head I could see the hole where I had fallen through."

"You were still alive—then?" Madame Ona asked eerily.

"Yes," Joe said. Then he did a double take. "What do you mean, then? I'm still alive!"

"Are you?" Madame Ona asked very softly.

Joe's mother began to sob again, sitting very erect beside Madame Ona, and very alone.

"ARE YOU?" Madame Ona repeated. This time it was a direct question rather than an implication of the opposite. It was a demanding question.

"Let me ask you a question, Joe," Dr. Wright said. "Did you come straight from that tank trap, as you

thought it to be, to your home here—in the twinkling of an eye?"

"Why, ah," Joe hesitated.

"I presumed as much," Dr. Wright said smugly. "Doesn't that *tell* you something?"

"Let me tell you about the genii," Joe said. His voice sounded high and thin to his ears. "It was the genii that brought me here."

"The genii?" Dr. Wright said, frowning.

"Yes," Joe said. "It wasn't a genii at first. It was just a haze—a sort of transparent black haze formed by two electron beams coming together. I made it into a genii myself—" He stopped, realizing he was balling it all up so it sounded crazy.

"Ah, I see," Dr. Wright said. "The powers of the mind to rationalize are remarkable—even in death!"

"So you don't believe the genii exists?" Joe said. "But it does!"

"What does it look like?" Mr. Chad asked from where he had been sitting quietly.

"It's ten or twelve feet high, and coal black, with a big white turban and an oriental costume on," Joe said. "But that's only when he's visible. He's been helping me with my tricks I've been playing this evening. You know, raising Freddy and George into the air and stuff." He turned to the two policemen. "The genii is probably what broke the windshield of your car."

The two policemen didn't answer. They were caught in the spell of the situation, drawn toward belief and drawing back from it.

"Let me suggest something to you, Joe," Dr. Wright said in a way that indicated he was picking his words carefully.

"Go ahead," Joe said.

"Don't consider what I'm going to say as being true, or even something I think to be true," Dr. Wright said

slowly. "Just consider it in the light of—*facts*. I gather that you believe the genii brought you home?"

"Yes," Joe said. "Just like that." He snapped his finger.

"Let's suppose," Dr. Wright said. "that you didn't fall into a tank trap. Let's suppose that the pencil of energy from the synchrotron gun *did* cut you in two—kill you, and what you fell into what was a symbolic representation of death. That the genii is a similar invention of your mind to rationalize the powers that you yourself took in death, created so that your conscious thoughts could accept your coming home instantly without having to accept the concomitant of your death."

"But it isn't so," Joe said. "It can't be so. Can it Margie?" he asked, turning to her. He saw the doubt in her mind and turned away from her.

"If it isn't so," one of the policemen said, "you're going to have to go down to the station with us and face the charge of desertion. If it is so, you'd better dematerialize pretty quick—or I'll take you down anyway." He chuckled uncomfortably.

"Yeah," Joe said, his shoulders sagging. "None of you believe me, and if I stay here I'm in plenty of trouble. I guess the only thing is to go back, the same way I came."

\* \* \*

"Or go *on*," Madame Ona said hypnotically.

"Ha ha," Joe said dryly. "You pick the funniest friends, Mom." He looked at the inexorable purpose on the faces of the two policemen and realized this was *it*.

HE WENT hesitantly at Margie, then impulsively pulled her out of her chair to her feet and kissed her. "Take it easy while I'm gone, Baby,"



he murmured in her ear. He mussed her hair lovingly, then released her and went to his mother.

"Bye for now, Mom," he said, bending over and kissing her tear-dampened cheek. "Next time I come home it will be with the consent of the powers that be."

He straightened and grinned nervously at the three teen aged boys and the other two girls.

"I'm going back where I belong," he said. Then, directing his remark to Dr. Wright and Madame Ona, "and it isn't where you think I'm going either, because I'm not dead. And just to give you something to chew on, I'll show you my genii."

He turned dramatically to the open center of the room and held out his hand.

"Materialize, genii," he said forcefully.

There was a puff of smoke. The genii, crouching low so as to get his huge bulk into the room, appeared, complete with turban and oriental dress.

"I am here, Master," his intensely black lips said, while the enormous, smoky eyes smiled at Joe.

"Take me back where I started from," Joe said.

The black presence enfolded Joe. He had a fleeting glimpse of the ring of blanched faces. Then, abruptly, he was standing on the roughly torn terrain of the battlefield, trucks loaded with supplies roaring past him on a newly constructed road.

The genii straightened, and stood with loose-sleeved arms folded, looking down at Joe.

"Now go back in that canteen and stay there until you are called out again," Joe ordered.

There was a swirl of dissolving form that vanished into nothing.

"Hey, wait!" Joe exclaimed, remembering suddenly that his stainless

steel canteen was half way around the world in the closet at home. Then he shrugged his shoulders. He could probably call up the genii from that distance as easily as from where he was.

THREE DAYS had passed, each taking an eternity—or so it seemed to Mrs. Ryan. There had been quite a time. Madame Ona had fainted after the big black man had materialized so briefly and taken Joe with him. One of the policemen had become sick.

But finally everything had been taken care of, and she had been alone. Not quite alone. Margie had stayed with her overnight, herself heartbroken at the realization that Joe was dead. They had comforted each other through the sleepless night, avoiding the subject of where Joe might have been taken to by the dark giant.

The house was more empty than it had ever been, even when Mr. Ryan had died. Mrs. Ryan had opened the door to Joe's room once and looked at the things strewn around the room—and closed the door quickly, breaking into uncontrollable sobs.

That had been yesterday. Now she was washing the dishes from her solitary breakfast, the suds swishing around her wrists in a clean sort of way.

Suddenly the front doorbell started ringing.

"Oh dear," she said, wiping her hands on a towel. "Why does it always have to ring when my hands are wet?"

She hurried across the living room and opened the door. It was a Western Union man. He handed out a telegram and his book for her to sign.

Her eyes went unconsciously to the telegram as she signed. There was no black border around it this time. Who could it be from?

She closed the door, went back to the kitchen, and sat down in a chair near the window before starting to open it. Its contents were brief.

"This is to inform you," it read, "that your son, Joseph Ryan, has been found, and that he is alive and unharmed."

It was from the war department.

"Oh!" she said, her emotions all mixed up.

Crying happily she went to the phone and called Margie Blish and told her the good news. It wasn't understandable, but Joe was alive. He was in Europe where he couldn't be yet if he had been home—but he couldn't have come home if he was in Europe. Margie was crying happily when Mrs. Ryan hung up.

Now she started singing as she finished the dishes. Everything was all right again. In some unaccountable way she had been given the privilege of having her Joe home for two weeks right in the middle of the war.

An hour later she was opening the door to Joe's room. The disorder no longer struck into her heart painfully. Now it was a good pain, to see the disorder he had created.

She straightened things up, caressing each thing lovingly, putting it away carefully. It would have to stay where she put it until Joe came home for good.

There was a dirty pair of sox. She would wash them, so she tossed them into the hall outside. There were the magazines he had bought and read. Maybe he would want to keep them. She piled them neatly on one corner of the table in front of the window. There was a pair of shoes. She put them in the clothes closet. His bed-

room slippers by the side of the bed went into the closet by the shoes. She took his pajamas off the hook on the inside of the closet door and tossed them into the hall with the dirty sox.

Her eyes fixed on the water canteen setting on the dresser with its cap laying on the glass top beside it.

"I'll put that on the shelf in the closet," she decided, snapping its lid on tightly.

It was heavy as she picked it up. She paused.

"Maybe I should empty it and wash it out," she thought. Then, "No, I'll leave it just the way it is."

She got a chair and stood on it, and pushed the stainless steel, canvas covered canteen back against the wall where it couldn't be seen while standing on the floor.

Half an hour later she had forgotten about it completely.

\* \* \*

It was two weeks later that the enemy began their systematic dusting with radio-actives that was to make land uninhabitable for centuries. They began in the Puget Sound area, and slowly advanced their operations toward Spokane and its surrounding towns including Moab.

Mrs. Ryan, along with her neighbors, was evacuated to east of the Rockies, and was given barely an hour to pack a few things to take with her.

A week later the dusting operation reached and passed her house.

The genii in its stainless steel bottle rested on the shelf in the closet, imprisoned beneath the cap that sealed it. It would be centuries before any living thing could come within miles of it.

It could wait.

THE END

# HELI-TAXI



By Sandy Miller



**T**HE ROOFS of the theater district were beginning to disgorge the hordes of theatre-goers. N'Yawk in January isn't warm, and the icy wind was mingled with a liquid downfall that was beginning to harden into something more than slush. And of course the crowd pressed for heli-taxis.

In the glare of lights, Grogan spotted an opening in the flurry of revolving rotors. Skillfully, with the judgment born of long practice, he eased his model Kar-92 into the tangled mass of air-borne traffic bringing up before the roof-marquee.

The couple stepped into the heli-taxi. Grogan touched the signal light showing the heli-taxi occupied; then, "where to?"

"Keen's—Tower's Place," the man answered briskly, "God, it's nasty out, and getting a heli-taxi on a night like this is a major undertaking."

"You got the best," Grogan replied with a grin. His fingers played with the throttle and he poured power to the keening turbine that drove the rotors. The Heli-taxi shot skyward like a bullet.

Crash! Bang! Thump! The heli-taxi was brought up sharply by the scrape of stubby wing against stubby wing as the driver of another cab misjudged his distance.

Grogan shot his head out the window. The air was split with thunderous obscenities as Grogan cut loose with all the practiced skill of a N'Yawker. Sulphurous curses turned the air into ozone.

The offending heli-taxi disengaged itself hurriedly, its driver, tough himself, quailing before the verbal barrage of Grogan. Grogan goosed the turbine once more, this time clearing the lower layers.

"Sorry, folks," he called back to his passengers, "some o'these rummies ain't learned to drive yet." The heli-taxi roared on triumphantly.

"Did you say something, dear?" the woman asked her escort.

The man chuckled. "They never change Elise; I'll bet this heli-taxi driver isn't removed more than one tenth of a personality from a Roman litter-bearer—even though three centuries have passed since then!"

## THE MONUMENT

★ By Jon Barry ★

**T**HE BRIGHT sunlight filtered through the clear glass windows. No suggestion of horror transmitted itself to the observer. All was quiet and peaceful—too peaceful. For not even a mote of dust floated on the air.

The air had not been disturbed for a long, long time. Nor would it be disturbed in the future—ever.

The laboratory was spotlessly clean, except for an almost invisible layer of dust that made slightly fuzzy outlines on the instruments and glassware. The animal cages were quiet, but a close look into them would have disclosed numerous small white skeletons.

And scattered about the floor were eleven heaps of whitened bones that once had been human beings. They lay exactly as they had fallen when their bacteriological hideousness had spread through the room—and then through the city, and the country and the world.

No birds sang, no voices spread their sweet music. The deathly stillness of perfect silence would soon be surrounded by crumpling metal and glass as time had its way. Invisibly the bacterial creatures surveyed their heritage.

Peace had come to the world at last. The fading sign on the door of the room mutely testified—"Biological Warfare Dept..."

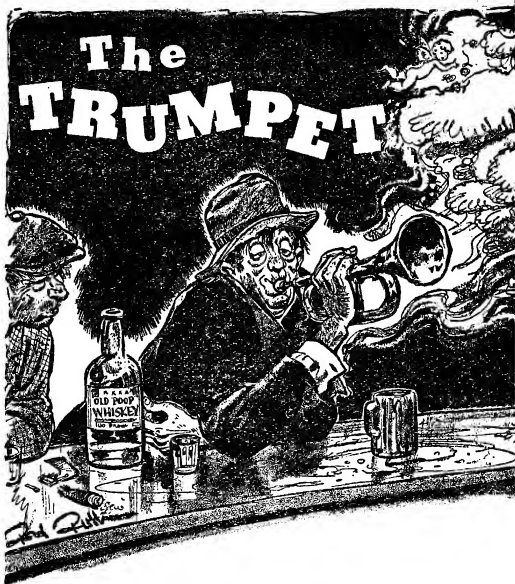
## VAMPIRE'S PARADISE

★ By L. A. Burt ★

**O**UTSIDE OF the Grand Canyon, no natural work probably holds men's interest and attention here on Earth, than the Carlsbad Caverns of New Mexico. These enormous excavations in the ground, carved by some master hand through long eons of time, have no peer in unusual rock-formations. Even the monstrous—and beautiful—gash that is the Grand Canyon seems somewhat puny before the awesome vastness of the Caverns.

The Caverns are too well known however to require detailing. They have connected with them though, a natural phenomenon which makes any curious person wonder. Precisely at the same hour each evening, flying in a gigantic horde, come hundreds of thousands—millions—of bats, seeking sustenance! They sweep out of the caves with a tremendous roar, like a huge fleet of planes, and though blind and in utter darkness, their extraordinary natural sonic-guiding apparatus—comparable to radar—enables them to operate and range perfectly.

It makes a person, surrounded though he is by the marvels of mankind's handiwork, just a little more thoughtful. What guides and motivates these things. Like the south-flying birds, science hasn't quite tagged the answer, but it is creeping up on it. Someday we'll know...



*By J. J. Allerton*

**The battered old trumpet gave forth  
a series of sour notes that made no  
sense to those present – on Earth . . .**



**"I**T AIN'T for me, Harry," Willie was saying. "Be reasonable. What would I be needing a trumpet for? It's me brudder, Jim. He died the other day. You remember Jim...?"

"Yeah. Sure I remember him. What do you take me for, a dope?" Harry demanded. "He was one o' my best customers. Never redeemed a pledge."

"See. What'd I tell you?"

"But that ain't got nothin' to do with this. I ain't lettin' nothin' out of the shop 'less it's paid for."

Willie began to weep again.

"...An' there's no use goin' into the mooch act with me, Willie. I ain't no client of yours. The trumpet's worth fifty bucks. I'll let you have it for twenty-five."

"Yeah!" Willie snarled. Forgotten was the act. Anger broke out in spite of him. "I see. You gotta make a profit. Even on your mudder you'd make one. Okay. I needed the trumpet so's I could play at me brudder's wake. It was his dyin' wish. You know

I can't dig that kind of scratch up."

"...Twenty-five bucks, Willie, an' the trumpet's yours..."

\* \* \*

The Roost was the lowest place on Van Buren street. It catered to the saddest people on the street. Five cent beers, ten cent whiskeys and a full pint of wine for a dime, those were the attractions of the Roost. It also featured a plate lunch, served at all hours, for a quarter. It was the place Willie repaired to after his rebuff by Harry the Hock.

Herbie Higgins, the man who owned the place, was standing behind the steam table as Willie entered. He bent an austere look on the mooch as he entered, and said:

"You got away with three beers last night. Benny told me this morning. Cough up fifteen cents."

Willie began to weep in reflex. The tears coursed down his cheeks.

"So help me, Herbie. I didn't mean it. We was drinkin' and 'fore I knows it I'm tapped. What the hell! I spent a buck in here, didn't I?"

"How do I know? Benny says you owe fifteen cents. That's all I know. Up with it, Willie."

Willie grunted something about Benny's antecedents and dug into his trouser pocket. His hand came away empty. A silly grin appeared on his lips as he dug into the other. Nothing. The grin changed to a look of horror as he frantically searched the pockets of his overcoat without success.

"Uh, Herbie... Somebody made me, I think. I'm broke. I know I had a half a buck in me kick..."

"The only one'd want to make you'd be a flea. Out! Out!"

"Herbie, please. I just had a tough day. An' I just tried to get Harry the Hock to do something for me. I need a drink, but bad."

"Out!"

Willie took a last look at the stolid features of Herbie Higgins and knew all his pleading was useless. Only the show of money could break the other down. Willie sighed, scratched his head and shambled out of the tavern. Whether he liked it or not, Willie was going to have to go to work...

**H**E WAS A slender man in an overcoat three sizes too large for him. He was wearing a pair of beat-up black and white sport shoes. The frizzled ends of dirty pants hung between the bottom of the overcoat and the shoes. No one had ever seen Willie the Weep's shirt or jacket. The coat was fastened close to his throat with a large-sized diaper pin. A filthy cap covered a thick head of greasy hair.

Willie was busy...

"...Mister. Please! Just a nickel..."

The man and woman Willie had approached shrunk away from him. Willie never made his mooch to a man alone, unless he was desperate. A man walking with a woman invariably tossed him a nickel just to get rid of him. He got the nickel. That made forty-five cents. Another nickel and he would have enough for a pint of wine and still be able to pay Herbie and get into his good graces again. Herbie hated welchers...

He looked up and saw the man coming toward him. He was well-dressed in a quiet sort of way. He was of medium height, of medium weight and as he neared Willie, the mooch saw that his face was the kind a man would forget the instant he saw it.

Tears began to course down the well-worn channels of dirt on Willie's cheeks: "Please. Please, mister! Just a nickel."

He reached out with claw-like hand toward the other's jacket sleeve. Surprisingly, the man didn't draw away. A slow smile broke on the man's lips.

Willie's tears flowed faster.

"... Me mudder's sick, me brudder's dyin' an' all I need's a nickel..."

"If that's the case," the man said, "I see no need for a nickel. On the other hand were you to have said you wanted a nickel to add to those you already have in order that you might obtain a drink, you would be telling the truth. In that case I would give you the coin you ask for."

Willie's eyes were wide in astonishment. "Me mudder's sick," he continued in sheer reflex. Then: "So okay. Me mudder's not sick. An' I need a nickel to make what I need for some wine. Do I get it?"

"More, if you wish..."

Willie thought on the qualifying phrase for an instant. It could mean anything.

"How do you mean?"

"I might make it a dollar..."

Willie rubbed at the stubble on his chin. A buck! What did this guy want him to do, kill someone? H'mm! If he talked about a buck that easy, he might make it two or even five.

"Make it five!" Willie took his courage in hand and spoke out loud for it.

"Very well."

Willie reached for the bill the other was extending to him only to see it withdrawn.

"Uh, uh! Not yet. It's yours. But first you must do something for me."

Here it comes, Willie thought. Well, it had been close.

"Yeah? What? Kill somebody?"

"Oh, dear, no! Nothing like that. I want you to buy something for me. Well, really redeem something, I should say." He slipped a square of paper from an inside pocket and gave it to Willie. "Here. And here's five dollars with it. That's what the pledge is worth. H'mm. Better another dollar for interest. Now... I will go along with you to see to it that you get the article

in question. I don't want to be seen, however. Here's the five dollars for your part of the deal. Okay?"

"For a fiver? Like stealin' pennies from a newsstand. It's in, pal."

**H**ARRY THE Hock looked up and a frown of annoyance made deeper furrows on his high, wide and corrugated forehead. His forehead extended all the way to the back of his skull. He was balder than a billiard ball. A billiard ball sometimes got chalk on it. All Harry's head ever got on it was sweat.

"Back again? The answer is still the same. Twenty-five bucks."

The pinched mobile features of Willie the Weep shaped themselves into a smile. That in itself was so unusual that Harry was struck speechless.

"Not so fast, Mr. Pawnbroker," Willie said loftily. He hitched his pants a step higher. The safety pin holding them had parted company with his underwear on the walk over. "This is business. See? I got a pledge here I want to redeem."

"You got a pledge? Why you couldn't hock air."

"This ticket says it's more'n air, see? An' I got the fiver that says I can take it back."

Harry lifted the paper gingerly from the counter where Willie had flung it in disdain. Willie was right. It was one of his own tickets. And for five dollars.

"Uh, Willie," Harry said. "This ticket's for five, all right. But there's a buck interest on it."

"No wunner the Indian's dyin' out. With you squeezin' 'em to death on the nickels. Here's the interest..."

The pawnbroker slapped his fleshy lips together. It sounded like he was chewing a cud. He shook his head back and forth on the long wrinkled

neck and finally walked back to his office. When he returned he was carrying a horn with him. He placed it on the counter before Willie and said:

"Take it away."

"It's a trumpet," Willie said.

"Nah. It's a tomato. You got bad eyes."

"...A trumpet," Willie said to himself.

He was studying the ceiling when the door slammed open and two men walked swiftly toward the rear. Harry erased the mental figures on the ceiling and stepped forward to meet them. One of the two was tall, the other, short. The tall one was lean, hard, dark-featured, stern. The short one was plump, moon-faced, gentle-eyed and a trifle bewildered.

"Are you the owner of this place?" the tall one demanded.

"Yep. Something I can do for you?"

"Yes. You have a horn, a trumpet, in pledge here. We would like to buy it from you."

Harry passed a sweaty palm over his mouth. This was proving an interesting evening. He had had but one horn in pledge and Willie had redeemed it only a half hour before.

"Yes," said the second. He had a high tenor voice, and stuttered a bit. "Yes. W-we w-w-would like t-t-to b-b-buy it from you."

"Well, I don't usually do that sort of thing..." Harry hedged.

The two exchanged triumphant looks. "You have it then?" the tall one asked again.

"Uh, not at present."

The little fat man became crestfallen at the news, but the taller one was made of sterner stuff. His brow darkened and his heavy voice reflected anger: "What do you mean?"

"You a copper?" Harry asked.

"From the Chief's Office," said the tall one. "Gabe, here, had his trumpet

stolen by a slick artist. So don't get funny ideas. Just bring the thing up and we'll take it off your hands."

"I—Uh, I redeemed it only a half hour ago," Harry said. "The man had the ticket..."

The little fat man clapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh, dear!"

"You're lying. We've been watching this place for the last hour. Nobody except a derelict's been in."

"That's the one. Willie the Weep. He redeemed the pledge."

"By Satan's tail!" the dark one growled.

"Mike!" There was horror in the small man's voice.

"Sorry, Gabe. Got to give the Devil his due. Clever. Knew we were watching for him so he hired another to get it. Well, might as well get on the trail again. You know this derelict as evidenced by the familiarity by which you use his name. Where can we find him?"

"I'd say over at The Roost on Van Buren street."

The two moved swiftly toward the door. The tall man was striding free and easy and the shorter one was trotting quick-step to keep up with his companion. There was puzzlement on Harry's face as he watched them leave.

**W**ILLIE THE WEEP inserted his index finger under the greasy cap and scratched long and hard at the mop of hair. He looked this way and that along the deserted street, but nothing of the man who was supposed to meet him. He shrugged his shoulders at last and tucking the trumpet under his arm, walked swiftly toward State street. It was tough, Willie thought, as he made for the street-car line, but the other guy was out one trumpet, and from the looks of the beat-up thing, nothing lost by it. And of course Willie was in five dollars.



Willie was forced to weep for the conductor. Five dollar bills are not legal tender on street-cars. Perhaps it was Willie's destination, Sheehan's Funeral Parlor on State Street just off Chestnut, which softened the heart of the conductor, and loosened the change-purse.

Willie got off at Chestnut and marched into the funeral parlor. Most of the shabby men looked down their noses at Willie, even though they recognized him as the dead man's brother. The bums of the near north side thought their brothers of the near south side, riff-raff. *They* had no Bug-house Square. Even Jim Welsh had looked down on his brother.

Now it was another matter. Death had made them even.

Willie felt a trickle in his throat at sight of the barrel of beer standing beside the coffin. The dozen men grouped about the coffin fell silent at Willie's approach. In each of their hands a schooner of beer glinted amber in the dim light. Willie gulped and marched straight to the coffin.

One of them caught sight of the trumpet under Willie's arm. "You brung it, Willie. Good boy. Jim said he'd have liked to hear you play. Hey, Mac! Fetch Willie a wee bit of the brew..."

Mac proved to be the bartender. He bent, picked up a schooner from the floor at his feet and slipped it below the spigot and turned it on. The froth was exactly an inch from the top when he was done. Mac carried the glass forward and handed it to Willie.

"Now, lad," he said. "Drink hearty and blow Jim a good tune."

Willie downed the contents in a single long swallow. He sighed deeply. It was better than the stuff Herbie had. Then he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his coat and placed the horn to his lips.

He tested the tone by blowing a chord on it. He shuddered at the raucous sound it gave.

"It's enough to wake the dead," one of them muttered.

Willie sent a look of apology around and said: "Been a long time. Out of practice."

"That's all right, Willie," Mac said from his position at the barrel. "Jim won't mind."

Willie smiled wistfully, put the horn to his mouth again and blew another chord. This one was worse than the first. He took a look at the disapproving faces, heaved his shoulders in a faint shrug and said:

"Guess Jim'll have to go without my playin'."

And this time even Mac didn't have a word to say about it. Once more the horn went under his arm. He turned and started to walk out. He stopped. Coming toward him was the medium-sized man in the grey suit. Despite the bad light Willie caught the mean look in the man's eyes. Willie wasn't waiting. He reached for the horn, pulled it from beneath his arm and said:

"You wasn't there, mister. I figured you wouldn't mind if I played Jim a tune on it..."

The man's mouth twisted in anger. He reached out to take the horn and stopped at the howl of terror which broke from the lips of the man nearest to the coffin. He was staring at something sitting upright in it.

"Is this Heaven or is it— It is the other place!" a voice said.

The voice belonged to the man in the coffin.

Willie, the man in the grey suit and the trumpet were all swept up in the wild rush to get to the outside. Only the plaintive voice remained behind, still asking whether he was in the right place or not...

**P**ANIC TOOK hold of Willie. For the moment he and the man in the grey suit were separated. He took quick advantage of it. He took off at a run for the darkness of Bughouse Square a short distance off. There were various paths leading out of it. In the darkness his pursuer would be lost.

Willie skidded to a panting halt on Clark Street. He looked up and down the street for a street-car but for once none was in sight. A cruising cab came slowly abreast. And Willie remembered the money he had. Seconds later he was on his way to The Roost...

"...A double-double," Willie panted as he slid onto the stool at the bar. "An' here's the scratch for it, Benny."

The dour-faced bartender peered over his glasses at the sweating Willie. "A buck! What did you do, stick up a bank?"

"Just pour the drink. The wise cracks c'n wait."

Willie swallowed the double bourbon as though it were so much water. "Aah! Now one more, Benny, an' I c'n breathe easy again."

"One more," Benny remarked, "an' you'll be lucky to be breathin' at all." He shook his head at the sight of the second following the first drink in the same way. "You must be thirsty."

"It ain't from hunger," Willie said. He laid the trumpet on the bar. It glinted dully in the fluorescent light. Benny peered at it.

"I get it," Benny said. "You made a Salvation Army play. Better get that thing out of here 'fore the cops walk in."

"Nah. This is legit. I got this out of hock for a guy an' he don't want it."

That one sent Benny back on his heels. "You got this out of hock for a guy and he don't want it...? Well, I guess I heard 'em all now."

But Willie was in another world.

He wasn't a whiskey drinker. Beer satisfied him more. Besides, whiskey was too expensive for him. The cheap bar yocky suddenly hit him. He grinned foolishly. "Y'know, Benny. The worl' losht a great trumpet man. Yeshir. Willie Welsh, the greates' li'l ole trumpet man the worl' ever losht."

"You're drunk," Benny said. And wandered off to serve another at the bar.

"Don' believe me, hunh? Okay! I'll show you. I'll show everybody. Yeshir. The best li'l ole trumpet is gonna be blowed by the bes' li'l ole trumpet player..."

Willie puffed out his gaunt cheeks after inserting the mouthpiece between his lips and blew a mighty blow. And from the wide-mouthed horn came another blast of raucous sound.

Benny ran toward him, lips working, eyes ablaze in anger behind the steel-rimmed glasses, face pale in fury. "What the-hell's the idea?" he growled. "You wanna have the cops in?"

But Willie was quite pleased. His eyes crossed and uncrossed as they tried to concentrate on the face before them. They gave up finally. One looked toward the ceiling while the other found a spot just above Benny's Adam's Apple. "How wash that, Benny-boy?"

"One more blast like that an' I'll throw you so far out it'd take a rocket ship to bring you back."

The sullen threat sobered Willie somewhat. Enough at least to bring his eyes into focus again. "Not good, huh?"

"Stinks!" Benny never used qualifying words.

"On the contrary," a strange voice said. "It was a bit of all right."

The man in the grey suit.

Willie became sober all over. He essayed a feeble grin. The grin was returned.

"You led me a fine chase, my friend," the man said. "But we are together again at last. And now..."

Willie looked at the slender hand extended to take the trumpet, looked up into the dark eyes level with his own and found the smile leaving his lips.

"Oh, sure. Sure, mister. I wasn't meaning to cop the thing."

"Just a moment, please," a heavy officious voice broke in.

**THEY TURNED** together and saw standing behind them two men. One was tall, dark-faced, lean, stern; the other was short and plump, with gentle eyes and a trifle bewildered-looking. It was the tall one who had broken in on Willie and the other.

"Well! Mike and Gabe. A couple of lost souls," the man in the grey suit said.

"Look who's talkin'," said the tall one.

"Y-y-yes. L-l-l-l-ook who's talking," said his companion.

"Shall we go through the services? 'We are gathered here...'" there was sardonic humor in the dark eyes surveying the tall and short man.

The glittering eyes of the tall man blazed in fury. "You've a nerve. After what you did..."

"I couldn't help it, really," the grey-suited man said. "Gabe looked so much the sucker, I had to do it. Imagine falling for the left-handed hammer gag..."

"Well, how w-w-was I to know?" Gabe stuttered. "He said he was a muh-muh-muh-mechanic come to fix the gates. They *were* squeaking something tuh-tuh-tuh-terrible."

The tall one turned on his shorter companion: "But did you have to leave the trumpet there? Even if Pete asked you to mind the gates? If you'd

have used that vacuum you have for a brain...?"

"Oh, come now, fellas! This gets us nowhere. We three are here. So is the trumpet. How shall we go about it?" the sardonic man in the grey suit asked.

"I say we don't have to go about anything," the tall one said. "The trumpet was stolen and we are here to get it back. It belongs to Gabe. That's all."

"Past tense. It *belonged* to Gabe. Right now our friend with the weeping countenance has possession. You know the rules?"

The plump face looked even more bewildered, a look shared by Willie. But the tall one knew what the other meant. His lips made silent recital of them.

"...That's right. He keeps the trumpet until he dies..." the grey-suited man said.

"But he can't," Mike said. "You know he can't!"

"Sorry. Those are the rules. Right out of the Chief's Office. Even I have to abide by them. So now what?"

Something clicked in Mike's brain. His smile was triumphant as he turned on the other: "Then what were you trying to do just as we came up?"

"There's nothing in the rules says he can't give it up if he wants. It is his, after all."

"Then let's all play," Mike suggested.

The grey-suited man spread his slender hands wide in a gesture of resignation. "Very well. I'll play first, mind? After all, there are two of you."

"Go ahead," said the tall one.

**"WILLIE.** Look in my eyes."

Willie looked deep into the dark eyes before him. There were such depths as he had never imagined. Clouded depths. Strange. There was a

voice in them also. The voice was saying:

"Look down, Willie."

Willie did. There were clouds below. They parted suddenly and he was looking on a vast green plain. It extended in gentle swelling as far as the eye could see. Figures walked or sat or lay on every hand. Winged figures. All carried musical instruments of one sort or another. He could hear the music now, instrumental and vocal.

"... Heaven, Willie," the voice whispered. "That's what they'll promise you. Take a good look. Nothing to do all day but play music. No beer, no yocky, no fun. Just sing and listen to somebody tell you how wonderful Heaven is. Some fun. Now, the other place... Uh, huh. It's exactly as they say. Only without the fire and brimstone. A tavern on every corner and never a charge for what a man drinks." The voice faded, and after a second the clouds came together again.

"... You can open your eyes, Willie..."

"I—I just saw Heaven," Willie whispered in awe. "Yeah. It *was* Heaven, wasn't it?"

"Right, Willie. Psalm singers and all."

"But there were no taverns..."

"In Heaven?" Mike said in horror.

"In Hell," the man in the grey suit promised.

Willie was bewildered. He turned from one to another. There was a decision they wanted him to make. He knew that. But Heaven without a tavern... He sighed. Suddenly a thought came to him.

"Hey! This guy showed me Heaven. Why don't one of you guys show me Hell?"

The tall man and the short one looked numbly into each other's eyes. The one thing Willie asked, they

couldn't do. The tall one tried to explain:

"Don't you see? We can't. We've never been there."

"How come this guy's been to Heaven, then?" Willie asked.

"Because he's still an Angel. Even though he has fallen from grace."

"He can go to both places and you guys can't. So he should know best. Right?"

"Willie! You surprise me. Cerebration. Excellent reasoning. Shall we dispense with further talk now? Clearly I have proved my point. The trumpet, Willie..."

"Wait!" Gabe suddenly held up his hand. "One thing. Without the trumpet there can be no judgment. You have entwined yourself in your own tail." Gabe had lost his stutter. And his bewilderment.

"Wrong, Gabe! I'll have the trumpet."

"It won't do you good. Give him the trumpet, Willie..."

The man in the grey suit put the horn to his mouth and blew into it. He blew until horns came up on his forehead, and a tail sprouted between his legs. But from the horn nothing came but wind.

"Hell!" Satan growled. "All that trouble for nothing."

"All your trouble's for nothing," Mike said.

"How come he couldn't blow it and I could?" Willie asked.

"The trumpet can't be blown by anyone except those who come from Heaven," Gabriel said.

"But I'm not. I'm still here..."

"Give me the trumpet, Willie," Gabriel said. He took it, caressed it for a second, then placed it to his lips. The chord he blew was not the raucous sound Willie had blown...

\* \* \*

*It was the sweetest sound Willie had*

*ever heard. The telegram announcing his brother's death was still clutched in his hand when the auto hit him. Willie hadn't heard the driver blow his horn.*

Harry the Hock was the first at the

scene. The accident happened directly in front of his pawnbroker's shop. He read the telegram aloud:

"... Jim's last words were, 'Have Willie play a trumpet solo for me.'"

THE END

## THE MAN AND THE NEUTRONS



By Walter Lathrop



MAJOR VINCENT was in conference with the "Know-How Boys", as they called the scientists, and the commanding officer. Colonel Cleary merely sat back and let the discussion take its head. The matter wasn't important—just something about putting dual Geigers in all the levels. There's a peculiar sense of timelessness and security when you're eight hundred feet beneath the surface of the Earth, in a concrete honeycomb, standing watch over a pile of atomic bombs.

The conference was dragging its boring way to a conclusion when the sound of a scuffle came from the door. Suddenly it burst open, and a Guardsman, dirty and disheveled forced his way in against the restraining arms of the Marine.

"Sir!" he gasped out, "let me in! Fletcher went nuts in the number eight bomb section!"

Major Vincent stood up. "What did he do?" he demanded swiftly. "He didn't get at the bombs..."

"He broke up a half dozen sir. Then he ran out. We shot him down but not before he locked the chamber. And we figure he's triggered one!"

"Cut through the door—we've got to get in there. I don't care how hot the place is." Vincent was through the conference room door like a shot.

Five minutes later he was in front of the entrance to the number eight atomic bomb storage room. A dozen men were working on the massive nickel steel door with a set of torches, and slowly it was beginning to give way in incandescent streams, as the tough metal softened and finally ran.

A knot of white-faced men stood around watching the operation, helpless to do anything until an entrance had been affected.

"Get me a suit and a Geiger—and a bunch of hand tools," Vincent snapped. "This is my baby—if we've got time. The rest of you beat it. Colonel Cleary has turned the operation over to me and he's evacuating the station. There's going to be one hell of a hole in the ground if this place goes. And if it doesn't..."

He didn't need to finish. The rest of the crewmen knew what he was thinking. That chamber was alive with lethal neutronic radiation. The man who entered it wasn't going to live long. Major Vincent

had a family, too.

It was a matter of minutes before the officer managed to get the protesting men to leave. Only the stuttering hiss of torches made any sound in the cavernous gloom.

When the entrance finally buckled under the searing flames, Major Vincent was ready. He stepped over the white-hot sill and entered the bomb-chamber. Ordinarily, he knew, sheathed in their cylinders, the innocuous-appearing atomic bombs were just that, but the sight that greeted his eyes was one of carnage. Bomb cases were shattered and all over the floor was scattered lumps of heavy dark metal—uranium and polonium, hurling into the atmosphere their hideous invisible charges.

The counter at the major's side clicked violently and then chattered into a whine. Even as he walked toward the bombs, his eyes seeking for the armed one, he knew he was dying on his feet. There was no pain, no sensation. But the tiny neutrons were converting the components of his body into other radioactives and making of him, a seething atomic furnace.

He found the armed bomb, and in a matter of minutes, he deftly removed the arming device preventing the ghastly explosion of three hundred atomic bombs.

Major Vincent straightened up. The leaden suit surrounding his tissues was so much paper to the nightmarish neutrons.

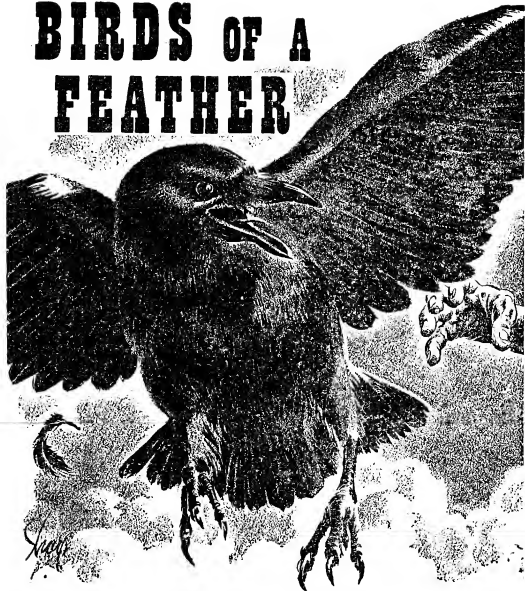
"All right boys," he called to the men outside hidden from the radiations by a shield and by their distance, "I've pulled the teeth on this baby—but I'm soaked. The room is hotter than Hades. Use tongs and shields on everything. We'll—" He corrected himself—"you'll have to seal this off when you've pulled the bombs and leave me here."

A hardened grizzled crewman outside the fatal room let a tear roll down his cheek. "Good luck, Major," he called, "I'm sorry it had to be you."

"Forget it," Vincent called back, his face pale. "Tell my wife and kids—you know..." There was silence for a moment. "I'm not going to wait any longer," came Vincent's voice.

The crewmen knew what he meant. A minute later came the muffled sound of a shot. The depot would not blow up now—and Major Vincent's body would remain where his charges had been...

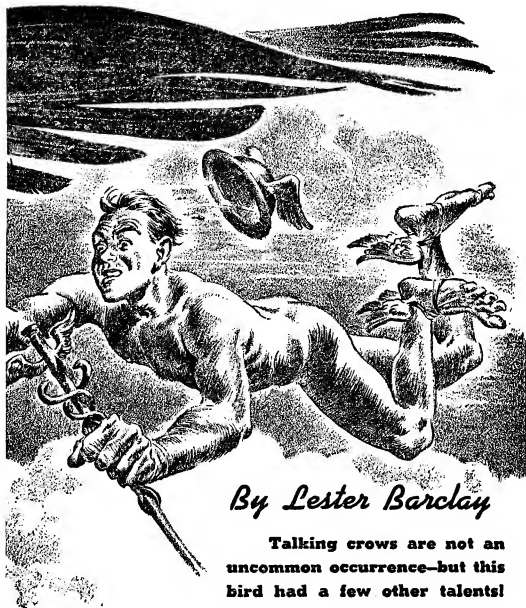
# BIRDS OF A FEATHER



**“Y**EA, BENNY...” Feathers’ Mason’s voice trailed off to a trembling halt as he slid to a stop at the last stool. He lifted the cloth-covered thing to the bar and looked at it, wide-eyed in awe. “It’s mine,” he whispered. “Mine until

the guy comes for it. Gees! I hope he never comes.”

Benny the bartender sucked his lips in noisily, finished drawing the beer from the tap and placed the glass before the customer and rang up the dime the man gave him. Not till then



*By Lester Barclay*

**Talking crows are not an uncommon occurrence—but this bird had a few other talents!**

did he move toward Feathers.

"Okay, character," he said. "So what's on that wacky, feather-filled brain of yours?"

Feathers pulled the cloth from the thing and it stood revealed, a bird-cage, and within, a large crow. "Look.

Old Joe at the Pet Shop said I could keep it till the guy calls for it..."

"What guy?"

"The guy that left it. It's a real talkin' bird. That's what Joe said."

"A talkin' bird, eh? Don't make me laugh. I seen plenty of these black

characters. This's a crow. K-r-o-w, crow..." Benny jabbed at the bars as he spelled the name out and with the last letter his index finger missed the slender wire and slipped within the cage. He barely pulled it out in time.

"Now you scared him!" Feathers cautioned. He made whirring sounds back in his throat as if to calm the bird. "Okay, Benny. Give him your finger."

"Are you nuts? Look at that beak he's got. Want me to lose my finger?"

"Go on. Take my word for it."

"Yeah? But how about his word?"

Feathers pursed his thin lips in disgust. It was obvious Benny knew nothing of the nature of birds. On the other hand birds knew nothing of Benny's nature. Maybe, Feathers thought, they were like humans and saw only Benny's ex-fighter's face, broken and scarred, and not the warm nature below. Feathers grinned. Of course! He turned abruptly toward the bird, made more of the whirring sounds and at the same time reached toward Benny and plucked an invisible something from Benny's shirt. He stopped making the sounds, cocked his head as if listening to something the bird was saying and turned back to the bartender with a broad smile.

"It's okay, Benny. I just showed him the feather I gave you yesterday and the bird says he knows you're one of us. Go on, give him a finger..."

"Just so he don't think it's a hand," Benny said. He extended a finger, drew it back, then plunged it into the cage. The jet, wedge-shaped head cocked, one beady eye looked with frigid distaste at the muscular thickness of flesh and then after a second the beak came down on the finger and stroked it gently though sharply.

"See," Feathers beamed in delight. "He likes you."

"Yeah. Yeah." Benny was pleased

also. "He does."

"...Hey! Benny..." It was a thick voice but no thicker than the man it came from. Everything about him was thick, arms, legs, body, face, neck and manner.

"Okay, Dirks!" Benny growled. The smile had disappeared under a frown of annoyance. Benny didn't like the man but Dirks was a good spender. But sometimes even the money Dirks dropped didn't quite make up for the guff he threw around. "Stick around, Feathers," Benny threw over his shoulder. "I'll be back."

"**W**HAT'S bird-brain got now?" Dirks asked.

"A crow Old Joe at the Pet Shop let him have. Some guy left it there."

"That's all the little bum needs. He's got feathers on his brain now. Maybe he'll be passing out wings next." Dirks thought he had said something very funny. His laughter was caught short by Benny.

"What'll it be, the usual?" Benny asked.

"Yeah. And what makes you so hard to get along with today?"

"Nothin'. Why?"

"I just don't like the way you said that. What's the matter, the little guy got something on you?"

Benny leaned over the bar. "Look, Dirks! Feathers don't bother nobody. He's nuts about birds so he thinks he's covered with feathers and passes 'em out to his friends an' then collects them. But he ain't never harmed nobody. An' what's more, I notice you don't mind takin' his half-bucks whenever he can mooch one to make a bet. So why don't you let him alone?"

"Well! Just a bird-lover, that's you, huh? Benny the bird we'll be callin' you. Okay. You're right about those goofy bets he makes, though. Seven horse win parlays. H'm! So go on



back to your feathered friend..."

"Dirks..." Benny leaned back and smiled crookedly at the other.

"Yeah?"

"I don't like you."

"No-o? Well! O-kay! So what happens now?"

"Nothin'—now. But..."

"Up your..." Dirks snarled abruptly. "Don't give me that. I've taken care of bigger guys than you."

"Sure. But that was when you were Mr. Big. Now you're just running a book for the Big Guy. You better run in your class, Dirks. Stay out of the handicaps."

There was venom in Dirks' glance as he followed the figure of Benny back to the small man at the far end of the bar. The little man was billing to the ebony colored bird, who seemed asleep on its perch.

"**F**EATHERS," Benny said, "why don't you stay out of Dirks' place? Every dime you make or mooch you drop on those silly parlays of yours. Get wise."

"Who me?" The little man turned a wondering glance at his muscular friend. "*Benny...* Look! One of those bets comes in I cash in the limit for the half. The percentages are with me."

"Percentages! You couldn't pick feathers out of a pillow. Here's a buck. Take the bird out of here and get it something to eat. Go on, now!"

It was impossible to say which was a tear and which a pocket in the make-shift garment Feathers called a jacket. But the dollar bill disappeared into one of the slits. Feathers covered the cage with the cloth, tucked the cage between one arm and his body and trotted out of the door. Benny smiled in deep affection after the man, and forgot him completely as a customer bawled for a drink at the opposite end....

Feathers turned in at the Mansion, slipped past the desk quietly—he had an idea the clerk wouldn't like having a bird in one of the rooms—and moved stealthily up the stairs to the second floor where he had one of the tiny cubicles they called rooms. The door closed with only the smallest squeak.

Once more Feathers uncovered the cage. He placed it on the chair next to the bed and smiled happily down at the unconcerned bird.

"Got some seeds somewhere," he said aloud as he began a searching of the various slits and tears in his clothes. "Had them this morning."

He brought some to light with a triumphant crow and tossed them to the floor of the cage. "Food. Eat, little bird. Eat."

"That's food....?" the bird said.

"Yeah. Good for you. Make you grow. Bird food."

"This stuff wouldn't make an ant grow. If that's what I'm going to get let's get back to that old jerk in the Pet Shop. I want meat."

"Me-at?" Feathers' voice faltered.

The bird ruffled its feathers.

The fact that the bird had been talking was suddenly clear to Feathers. Although the old man at the shop had said it was a talking bird Feathers had not been able to make it talk. Nor had he ever heard it do so at the shop. Now he knew it was true. But such talk he hadn't imagined it could do. This wasn't talk; this was conversation, with the bird replying as if it had an intelligence of its own.

The shock of finding out turned Feathers' legs to water and he fell back on the bed and stared at the bird in disbelief. "I heard you talk. I wasn't imagining it."

"What you heard ain't nothin' to what you'll hear if you don't get me

some food. This stuff on the floor might be for the birds but I'm telling you it ain't for this one."

Feathers leaped from the bed and started for the door.

"Hey! Get back here and let me out!" the bird shouted.

Feathers undid the snap lock with trembling fingers and held out a couple of fingers for the bird. The creature stepped daintily onto the fingers then hopped upward to settle itself firmly on Feathers' shoulder.

"Let's go, Jack," the bird said.

**B**ENNY LOOKED away from the Racing Form at the sound of the door's opening. He smiled a greeting and immediately went back to the form.

"Benny..." Feathers' voice drew his attention.

"Yeah?"

"I'm back."

"I see."

"Look what's on my shoulder. He said he was hungry. He said he wanted some meat."

"So what do you want from me? My right arm? Feed him."

"I don't know what to give him."

"F'r the love of Pete, Feathers! I'm trying to pick a winner. Do you have to come in the only time I got a spare minute...?"

"Okay, Benny. I'm sorry..." Feathers started to move away.

"Get back here you little jerk," Benny said. "I'll give him some beef. Maybe that'll satisfy him."

It did.

The bird was picking the last of the shreds of meat on the plate when Benny finished picking the horses he thought would win. Feathers was bent over the bar watching Benny's figuring. The bird hopped back to Feathers' shoulder and put its head under one wing.

"Okay, Feathers," Benny said. "There's only one live one running today. Hotspot at Lincoln Fields in the fifth. Take this deuce and put it on the nose for me."

"At Dirks' place?"

"Why not? There's a character I'd like to take for a couple of bucks. Hotspot ought to pay eight or nine to one."

"Yeah. Easy. Okay, Benny. I'll be right back..."

**T**HE USUAL crowd of half-buck bettors crowded the smoke-filled room behind the cigar store front that was Dirks' book. The running of the fourth race at Lincoln Fields was coming over the wires. The favorite won and here and there men moved away from the crowd watching the sheet markers to step to the cashier's window to collect their winnings. Many of the horse players recognized Feathers and either called him by name or nodded to him.

Feathers looked at the sheet for the fifth at Lincoln. Hotspot was at three to one. Feathers wrinkled his nose. The nag was going to be a favorite before the running of the race from the looks of it. Oh, well, he thought as he moved to the window. It wasn't his dough...

"Two to win on..." Feathers began.

"...Joe's Boy," a voice whispered in his ear.

"...Joe's Boy," Feathers said.

The ticket came at him and he picked it up. "Joe's Boy," he spoke aloud. "Holy cat's! Who told me to play that dog?"

"I did," said the bird. "He'll win, going away."

"You're nuts!" Feathers turned his face toward the bird on his shoulder. "Why did you do that? Benny'll kill me."

Feathers could only conclude that the bird didn't care. It put its head back under a wing and went back to

sleep. Feathers walked back to Benny's place with lagging steps.

Benny had his radio tuned on to the race results. He was busy at the moment and only nodded to Feathers as he came in.

"D'ja get it on?" Benny asked after he finished with the last of his customers.

"Yeah. Joe's Boy to win..."

"That's good... What? Who the hell told you to play that dog?" Benny howled.

"The bird."

"The bird! Damn it to hell, Feathers. You're takin' advantage of me. You know Joe's Boy c'n only run in mud. Look out there. We haven't had rain in a week. That track's lightning fast. Why did you listen?"

"He got me as I was making the bet. Before I could stop myself it was out. So I figured a hunch bet for you..." Feathers stopped. It was a very lame excuse, he knew.

"...And now for the run-down of the fifth at Lincoln Fields," came the voice from the radio. "*Blah-blah-blah-blah...* Pimson, the favorite, broke fast to a three length lead. Hotspot was second, Gaynor, third. At the quarter, Gaynor made his bid early and took the lead; Pimson and Hotspot running neck and neck. At the half, Hotspot moved up, running easily, Pimson second by a length and Crest, third. At the..." The voice faded off for a couple of seconds then came back in... "The winner of that race. Joe's Boy! I'll have the mutuals in a second..."

Benny and Feathers looked at each other in a wordless silence. Then, "Joe's Boy," Benny said. "I don't believe it. He's a mudder. He's never won on a dry track."

"...Joe's Boy paid one hundred and ten dollars to win..." the announcer's voice came in again. He fin-

ished the mutuals on the race and then said, "The winner of the last race really ran true to form. Here's what happened. As they came past the three quarter pole one of the mains broke and flooded the track in a couple of inches of water. So on a sunny day at Lincoln, on a track that hadn't seen water in a week a mudder came in to win. Joe's Boy, a horse that hadn't won in four weeks because it hasn't run on a wet track in all that time, came in in a walk..."

"Feathers," Benny began.

"Huh?"

"From now on we let the bird pick 'em."

"Yeah. And how!"

"We got time for the last race. I like Heddy. Put a sawbuck on the nose for me."

"You want me to go back and collect and bet. . .?"

"Sure."

"But you just said let the bird pick."

"I was kidding. You know the damn bird can't talk."

"I'm telling you Benny..."

"Okay. So tell 'im to start talkin'."

"Can't you see he's asleep."

"Wake him up."

But despite all Feathers' pleading the head would not come out from under the wing.

"All right, Feathers. Tell you what. You put a fin for yourself on any horse the bird names if he should come to."

**H**EDDY ran last.

Benny accepted the loss philosophically. "And who did the bird pick?" he asked.

Feathers heaved his thin shoulders. "Something named Gabriel. Or maybe I didn't hear right."

Benny stopped counting his winnings and looked up. "Gabriel? There was a nag ran claiming races a year

or so ago named that. But he hasn't run in a long time."

"Maybe they sold him to the glue factory," Feathers said.

"Could be. Oh, well. I made some dough on that. And I suppose you lost that fin?"

"Nah. I didn't play."

Benny was amazed. "You didn't play? Well, how do you like that? Just for that you can keep the fin. Do what you want with it."

"Anything I want, Benny?"

"Anything."

"Like all the beer I could drink, f'r instance?"

Benny smiled and nodded. Beer was the little man's weakness. He could indulge his taste in it all day. Fortunately, he never had enough money to really get going on it. Feathers had a prodigious appetite for the stuff. The fin would just get him started. But Benny knew Feathers would spend the money and go back to the Mansion and sleep it off.

"As much as the fin will buy," Benny said.

"Let's go pal."

"Yeah," said the bird suddenly. Its head had come abruptly from under the wing at mention of beer. "Fill 'em up."

"Hey!" Benny's head came up sharply. "It really does talk."

"Like I said. And he wants beer, too."

"Okay. I'll buy all he'll drink," Benny said.

All the bird could drink was three glasses. Feathers had almost spent the five dollar bill in that time. Benny stopped him before he could spend all of it.

"Save some for breakfast," Benny said. "You got to take care of the bird."

"Yeah. Me an' my little feathered friend," Feathers said. "Got to take

care of 'im. That's what."

Feathers marched out of the tavern, humming a song in an off-key tone. The bird was also singing. But not in English. Benny looked puzzled.

"It's a Greek," one of the men at the bar said. "Musta been a Greek feller have'a the bird sometime. Old song..."

**F**EATHER'S eyes were red-rimmed as he moved slowly to the bar. The bird was on his shoulder. Benny couldn't tell the color of the bird's eyes. As usual, they were closed.

"How you feeling?" Benny asked.

"Aah!"

"Sit down and I'll bring you some coffee. And what will our friend have?"

"Meat!" the bird called hoarsely.

"So early? Okay. I got some leftovers."

Benny waited until Feathers downed the coffee and roll before he brought the morning paper over. "See the paper yet, Feathers?"

"Nah. I feel like hell."

"Listen..." Benny folded the paper to the sport sheet and read aloud: "...Larchmont was declared the winner of the last race. The stewards said that evidence of the ringer being Gabriel was beyond doubt. It is said that the syndicate made a fortune on the race at the track although bookies will have to pay-off on Larchmont to whoever held tickets."

Feathers' mouth hung wide. "You mean...?" he couldn't finish.

"Yeah, Feathers. The bird called the winner, all right. Y'know. There's something screwy about this. First of all the bird picks a horse to win and a miracle takes place. Then it calls the turn on a ringer. I can't figure it out but maybe we can make some real scratch with that bird. I'm going to play a hunch. There's a fight

on tonight we could clean up on. Dirks is booking it for Len Hayden. The odds-on favorite is this new kid, 'Tiger' Jenks. He's fighting Grey, the welter champ. Grey is on the way out. But the talk is it's fixed. Grey is going to fold..."

"You mean," Feathers asked, "We'll ask the bird?"

"Right."

Feathers held his fingers out and the bird hopped up onto them. "Look. We got a problem. You got to help us. Who's going to win the fight tonight, Grey or Jenks?"

The wedge-shaped head moved this way and that, the bright, beady eyes regarding the man with intent. The beak opened and Benny would have sworn it was to yawn so wide did it open. The beak closed again. Silence.

"What's wrong, Feathers?"

"Maybe it only knows the answers to race horse winners," Feathers said.

The bird hopped to the now-familiar spot on Feathers' shoulders. Its head came close to the man's ear. The beak was still closed but Benny noticed a look of intent in Feathers' eyes. And shortly after Feathers said:

"Grey's gonna be the winner."

"That does it!" Benny slammed his fist to the bar. "I was right. Let's see. It's a little after eleven. Feathers, we can clean up today. Baseball pools, the races and the fight tonight. Fifty-fifty. I'll put up the scratch and you put up the bird. And we'll bet the whole thing in Dirks' book. Of course Len Hayden won't feel too good about it but what the hell do we care?"

Feathers was hopping in excitement until the bird raised a fuss.

"Take it easy, Jack. Keep it up and we'll take off..."

But Benny had thought of something which took a little of the edge from their plans. "Can't work the baseball pool today. That's gonna take

a day or two. Gotta put an ad in the paper. Besides, we'll need the dough the races and fight will bring in. So we'll read all the entries in the form... H'm. I better call the boss and have him get a relief for me. Be right back, Feathers."

Feathers was already marking the winner of the fifth race by the time Benny returned from making the call. "Three more to go," Feathers said.

"Good. The relief will be here right after lunch. Post time's two on the first race so we've got a little time. Hey! Why play Lincoln? Laurel's post time's an hour earlier. So we'll play the first two at Laurel and the others at Lincoln."

**T**HE FIRST two races brought them four hundred dollars. When Feathers returned at a quarter of two to play the horses at Lincoln Fields Dirks stopped him before he reached the bet window.

"Feathers..."

The little man with the large wistful eyes turned. "Yeah?"

"You're doin' all right today. Who you layin' the dough for?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to know, that's all."

"If you don't want to take it say so. Logan will book all I got."

"So will Heyden," Dirks said. "Besides, you won it here. Len might not like it if you took it away and didn't give him a play."

Sudden fear made Feathers' eyes larger and darker. "Benny's puttin' the dough up," he said.

The thick face settled into lines of thought. Dirks shook his head twice and then again. He knew Feathers was afraid of him. And he thought to get to the bottom of this strange and profitable betting Feathers was doing.

"Where's Benny getting his infor-

mation? Who's handicapping for him?"

"Nobody. We're just figuring the winners out."

"Just figuring it out. Uh, *hunk!* That makes sense. You haven't made a win bet in all the years I've known you. And Benny plays fifty-cent daily doubles. Now you're betting...how much on this race?"

"Two hundred," Feathers stumbled over the figure.

"Two hundred. An' you want me to believe you. Who's doin' the handicappin'?"

"The bird," Feathers said.

That stopped Dirks. He looked from Feathers to the bird on his shoulder. There was something in Feather's voice which told him the little man was telling the truth. "Okay. So let's hear the bird give me the winner of the first at Lincoln."

"Aw, Dirks..."

"Come on!"

"Who's going to win the first at Lincoln?" Feathers asked.

"Game Leg," the bird intoned in its hoarse voice.

"Game Leg. That's a ten-to-one shot. He's crazy. The form picks Hor-net's Roost."

"So we'll lose two bills then," Feathers said.

"Maybe. But I'll be around. And if Game Leg wins you and I are going to have a talk."

Game Leg won.

Feathers was surprised at the friendly look on Dirks' face. The big man slapped Feathers on the shoulder and said: "You're all right, Feathers. Two grand that race brought you. Keep it up and you'll break the syndicate. Of course they might get mad about you winnin' all this dough but what the hell. A guy lives only once."

"What do you mean?"

"Well. Len isn't going to take this

beating you're giving. He'll lay off. But after a while nobody'll book his bets. Yeah. Nobody'll book his bets..." Dirks' voice took on a confidential note. "...Course he's got the Hi-Lo club. And maybe... Feathers. I'll buy that bird from you."

"He ain't for sale. He ain't mine and I got to give him back."

"I got an idea you're going to sell that bird. Maybe tonight. I'll be seeing you..."

Feathers didn't like the tone the other used. Or what he thought was behind the words. Dirks was a vicious man. He was capable of many things. Suddenly Feathers didn't want to stay in the place. Yet he was too frightened to leave. Benny wasn't due to arrive until the second race. Maybe the bartender would have an idea...

**B**ENNY WAS neither frightened nor willing to change books. "To hell with Dirks. We play here until they tell us they're not taking our bets. And don't let anyone near the bird. Stay close to me!"

But though they kept an eye out for Dirks he was not to be seen. Not until the fourth race did he appear. He stepped from the office at the start of the race, smiled toward Benny and Feathers then took up his post near the inside door and watched the sheet men at work.

The horse the bird picked in the fourth race won and paid six for one. Benny stepped to the cashier's window while Feathers watched. Feathers saw Benny talk to the man behind the window, saw Benny shake his head and step to the door leading to the cage. It opened inward and Benny stepped inside.

Feathers spent his time watching for Benny's return in cooing at the bird, and now and then to run a sly finger along the inner line of the

bird's wings. Quite suddenly the call went on for all bets to come in on the fifth race at Lincoln. And Benny had still not returned.

Feathers ran to Dirks. His face showed the alarm he felt. "Hey. Benny hasn't come outa there."

"Out of where?" the bookie asked.

"The cage. He went in. I saw him. But he ain't come out."

"Y'know, Feathers," Dirks spoke in amused tones. "You're a little nuts. Or maybe a lots. Benny came out a couple of minutes ago and went down."

"I didn't see him."

"You didn't see anything but that crow you were playing with."

Dirks could be right, Feathers thought. Benny could have done that and he wouldn't have noticed. Maybe he went back to the tavern?

"...And I'll bet Benny's got your end of the dough. Good-bye fresh. That barkeep's a sharp character, Feathers. Too bad. Maybe you'll sell the bird after all."

"Not if I were starving. Not to you, anyhow."

**B**UT BENNY *hadn't* gone back to the tavern. Feathers waited all the rest of the afternoon and till late at night. He had two hundred dollars Benny had given him to hold and was able to buy beer for himself and the bird. Later, it made no difference whether Benny returned or not. Feathers was in no condition to notice. And once more he and the bird went out deep in song.

The clerk at the Mansion was asleep. Feathers stumbled once or twice but managed to get to his room. He fell on the bed in a stupor and went sound asleep. The bird settled itself on the back of the chair. Their sleep was instant and deep. Neither heard the man enter the room

a short while after.

Dirks put the flashlight back in his pocket. There was no need for it. Feathers had turned on the light as he came in the room. It was still on. The thick-set man removed a dark cloth from his pocket and stepped warily toward the bird. Then the cloth was over the bird and an instant later the bird was in the cage and the cloth draped the cage. Dirks was smiling in unholy glee as he stepped warily from the room and closed the door behind him.

For perched on the chair was a bird, as black and large as the one he had taken with him. Only the one Dirks had brought was just a common crow, tame as a cat, one he had bought from a pet shop earlier that afternoon...

\* \* \*

**F**EATHERS wasn't quite sure he had seen correctly. He had opened his eyes from out of a sound sleep. The door had seemed to open and a tall, slender man stood on the threshold. Then the door closed and the man was bent over his bed.

"I have come for the bird," the man said. "The man at the pet shop told me you have him."

Feathers heaved a sigh. So soon. He had hoped the owner of the bird wouldn't show up. He motioned toward the chair.

"The cage is on the..." He stopped. The cage was nowhere to be seen.

"I don't care about the cage," the stranger said. "Where is the bird?"

"Right there."

"This? This is a common crow, my friend. Now let us not have any more foolish talk. I have to meet with friends and it is not meet that Hermes comes without his favorite perched on his shoulder."

Feathers slid from the bed. There

was something about this slender man he didn't like. Something that brought the icy chill of death into the room. The stranger seemed poised on the balls of his feet as though ready for instant flight.

"Now don't get excited. The bird there is—is the only bird I have."

"Obviously. And as obvious is the fact that it is a crow of ordinary parentage, not one spawned by a God. Mortal! Speak the truth else I blast you to doom..."

Feathers fell back in fright at sight of the queer-looking tube which had suddenly appeared in the stranger's hand. "Please. You gotta believe me! I'm tellin' the truth..."

A searching glance brightened the dark eyes of the stranger. He whirled toward the crow and lowered his head until it was inches from the bird's. When he lifted his head the eyes were no longer accusing.

"You spoke the truth. The bird has told me an evil one purchased him and brought him here and took back with him the bird of good-omen. You must find this man for me. Before the dawn lights the sky."

"But that's impossible. I don't know the guy..."

"He is an evil one who is a gambler."

"Dirks!" Feathers shouted. "He stole the bird."

"You must find him. Tonight..."

"But there ain't time."

The stranger thought a moment. "Perhaps I am asking too much. I cannot do it myself and must use your services. Very well. I will be at your side always. Fear nothing. This bird will sit on your shoulder as the other did. I will give you until the morrow's dawn..."

**R**OD DIRKS slipped the cover from the cage, reached gingerly within

and let the bird out. It settled itself on Dirks' shoulder as if it had always known the perch.

"Hah. Not afraid of me," Dirks gloated. He smiled in self-satisfaction. "Now we'll see how big a shot Len Heyden is. I wasn't running things right for him, huh? Okay. So he gave me a job instead of the cut like he said would be mine. To hell with him! Now I'll take over. First I'll clean up on the races. With your help. Gees! I didn't think. Maybe he won't talk for me. What was it Benny told the boys. The bird always tells the truth. Well. Might as well find out. Who won the fight tonight?"

The bird told the truth. Grey had won...

The next afternoon Dirks set his plan in motion. He took whatever money he had and sent it down to another bookmaker with a messenger and gave the man orders to spread the money over the races Dirks had selected. He also made sure the other book would know the messenger. The word would soon spread that Len Heyden was pulling a betting coup. Dirks knew the syndicate wouldn't see eye to eye with Heyden on that.

By evening Dirks was twenty thousand dollars to the good. The bird had picked seven straight winners. The money was in his pocket when he left the store that night. And perched on his shoulder was the bird. He hailed a cab and directed the driver to drive him to the Hi-Lo club.

He knew he would be a little early. But he was hungry and besides he wanted certain people to get used to seeing him with the bird on his shoulders. He caused a great deal of amused comment. Dirks didn't care. He had an idea the laugh would be the loudest from his mouth before the night was over. He wondered idly, as he ate, whether Feathers had found



out that the bird he had found on awakening was not the one he had left on the chair when he went to sleep.

Then a hand was slapping his back and a voice was saying: "Nice going, Rod. What were you trying to do, queer me?"

Dirks looked up. Standing behind him was a lean man in sport jacket and lemon-colored slacks. There was a look of amusement in the dark eyes intent on his. But the thin lips were set in a straight line and there was something in Len Heyden's attitude that showed he didn't think what Dirks pulled was funny.

"I got some hot tips and played them, Len. What the hell! I didn't play them in our books."

"My books," the other corrected him. "No, you didn't. I will say that. You played them in the biggest syndicate house in the city. Twenty grand, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. And I figure to make it a hundred before the night's over."

"H'mm! Playing poker, maybe."

"Not maybe. I always wanted to get into that game of yours."

"It's open. And your dough's as good as the next guy's."

"Fine. Mind if I bring my feathered friend?"

"No. But he can't get into the game."

"Very funny."

"Not as funny as you were today. I won't forget it, Rod. Be seeing you..."

The smile became a crooked snarl as Dirks watched the other disappear into the room which later that night would be the scene of the poker game. Dirks knew Heyden's weakness. The gambler loved poker. He never bet a horse, or shot craps, or played the stock market. He had

always said poker was the only game to play. But it had to be for big stakes. And he played it that way. Hundreds of thousands of dollars changed hands every night in that room. Rod Dirks wanted to get hold of some of it.

And intended to, one way or another...

THE LITTLE man in the patchwork garments looked up at the man standing in the doorway to the cigar store.

"Dick. I gotta find Dirks. You gotta help me."

"Sure, Feathers. But I don't know where he is. He made a killing on the races. That's all I know."

"So what does a guy like Dirks do with all the scratch he made today?"

"Well. I don't know about Rod Dirks. But if I was him I'd head for that big game they have over at the Hi-Lo club."

"That's Len Heyden's place, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

"Wasn't Dirks a partner of Heyden's once?" Feathers continued his questioning.

"Uh, huh. I heard Dirks tried to double-cross Heyden and got caught. So Heyden saw to it Dirks stayed low and gave him this joint. To man-age."

Hope dawned in the large wistful eyes. Maybe Dirks was thinking to pyramid the dough? Maybe he wanted to get even with Heyden. With the bird he could break the game. The bird knew the answers to everything...

THE WAITER said: "The gentlemen are in the game room."

There were five of them seated at the table. Heyden didn't bother with

introductions. He merely said, "Table stakes for the first two hours. Ten grand. Then open stakes, no limit for the last hour. Start it round, Grimes..."

Dirks had discovered that the bird could speak in a whisper. All he had to do was lean toward the wedge-shaped head and ask, "Who?" and the bird would reply. But the reply was always the winning hand, not a name. It was good enough for Dirks. Just as long as he knew who was going to win the hand.

For the most part they were a silent group of players. The man named Grimes, a paunchy man in his late fifties, a cigarette dangling morosely from the corner of a lip, played tight poker, underplaying his hands. Another, Karsku, who looked more the bookseller, rather than the bookmaker, a small precise man who wore gold-rimmed glasses, played in plunges, using percentages for his system. Heyden played conservatively, obviously conserving his strength and best game for the no-limit hands in the last hour. Dirks had no business in the game with any of them.

At the end of the first hour Dirks was twenty-two thousand ahead. At the end of the second he was forty ahead...

"Gentlemen," Heyden looked away from his watch, "the last hour. No-limit, open stakes. Dirks' deal." He threw a fresh pack at the thick-set man and watched him slip the pack from the cellophane. "You've been pretty lucky, Dirks."

They were the first remarks Heyden had made directly to the other.

"I'm going to be a lot luckier," Dirks said.

"That bird must be a luck-charm for you."

"Sorta."

"I'm told we have a dissatisfied

customer, a man who won a piece of change and had it taken away from him."

Dirks finished dealing and looked down at his cards. "You know how it is, Len. Some guys never know when to let up. I had the boys rough him up a bit. I can't afford to show a loss."

"Captain Ahern called me today, Dirks. He said he'll have to close the place up. Said he can't allow that sort of stuff to go in his precinct. Looks like you'll be needing a job."

Dirks shrugged his shoulders and looked about the table as the betting began. Open stakes proved a different game than the others. The first hand ran forty thousand and was won by Grimes. Dirks stayed for one card. The bird called Dirks the winner of the next three hands and Dirks played his cards badly and won only thirty thousand on the three hands. But Heyden was the biggest contributor, as he had also been to Grimes' winning hand. Dirks figured Heyden had already lost better than fifty thousand.

It was during Karsku's deal that the knock sounded at the door. Heyden stayed out the hand and stepped to the door and opened it. Dirks was facing the door and could see who stood on the threshold. It was Feathers. And on his shoulder the crow Dirks had substituted for the real talking bird. Feathers and Heyden talked in low tones for a minute or so and after Heyden returned to the table, Feathers trailing him.

"This man says you've got his bird," Heyden said as he resumed his seat. "That right?"

"He's nuts!"

"I'm not. That's my bird on your shoulder!"

"And what's on yours?"

"One you put in the other's place."

"Sorry, pal," Heyden turned to

Feathers. "You'll have to wait outside to settle your differences."

FEATHERS looked about him in despair. Dirks had the upper hand. He had hoped Heyden would help him. A dazed look came into his eyes at the sound of the voice in his ear. It was the voice of the stranger who called himself Hermes:

"There is money in your pocket. Enough to play. Get in the game."

"Mr. Heyden... I've got some money. Could I get in?"

Heyden started to turn the other down but stopped at Dirks' derisive laughter. "This is for big stakes, pal." He made it as easy as he could.

Feathers reached into a pocket and pulled out a thin packet of bills. They were all thousand-dollar bills and when he had spread them wide there were fifty of them lying there.

Heyden looked around the table. They all wore amused smiles, all but Dirks. "I don't see why not," Heyden said. "You've got the dough. This is for open stakes, no-limit, pal."

"Now wait a minute!" Dirks broke in. "This guy's nuts! Look at him with that bird on his shoulder."

"That ain't a fairy on yours, friend," Grimes said drily.

What the hell, Dirks thought darkly. I've got the real bird. Let the goon sit in. I'll take his dough too.

So the two sat, each with a bird on his shoulder. The game suddenly became quite rough. As though sensing Dirks was out to get him, Heyden stayed in every pot the other was in. But Dirks' streak of luck stayed with him. At the end of forty-five minutes of play Heyden had lost all his money and was playing on paper. Dirks was better than a hundred thousand dollars to the good. And most of it was Heyden's.

"I told you this was going to be my

lucky night," Dirks said.

"The night isn't over," Heyden said in reminder.

Feathers stayed out of most of the hands but got caught in the middle of one which Grimes took. The little man lost almost half his money on that one hand. He kept watching Dirks and it came to him that with the thick man's luck plus the combination of bird Dirks was going to come out on top.

Feathers kept turning his head this way and that to see if he could spot the dark stranger but hadn't. Then suddenly he did. He took but one look then bent his head over the cards in his hand. The stranger was standing over his shoulder. The man was almost nude but for a breech cloth. Winged sandals were on his feet and a golden winged helmet covered the dark curls. The rod he had produced in Feathers' room was in his right hand.

"... Your deal, Dirks," Grimes said.

Dirks picked up the fresh deck tossed to him and riffled the cards. He seemed a little nervous and spilled some of the cards. It was all an act. Dirks had once made a living as a crooked card dealer in a gambling joint. He could do unbelievable tricks with cards. To fix a deck was child's play with him. He laid the deck down for Grimes to cut.

And simultaneously the birds left their masters' shoulders and met above the middle of the table in a sputtering of sounds and threshing of wings. Feathers had turned his head at that instant. He saw the stranger bend toward the table. Then the man's motions were too swift to follow. The next he saw the man was straight again. Yet Feathers had the idea that the dark man in the helmet and sandals had touched the deck waiting to be cut.

"Get those damned birds!" Heyden said sharply.

Feathers reached out and grabbed the nearest wing and pulled. The bird quieted instantly and settled itself on Feathers' shoulder. Dirks grabbed at his and missed. But the bird made no attempt to fly away. It hovered in mid-air for an instant, then flew down to grip the cloth of Dirks' suit.

"Cut!" Dirks called.

Grimes cut the deck and Dirks dealt. He looked at the open card and the closed two in his hand and he knew he hadn't forgotten his old art. He grinned in a shallow twisting of his lips and turned his head. "Who's going to win?" he asked.

And for the first time the bird replied in a voice above a whisper: "Full house, aces high..."

They all looked startled at the loud voice, then annoyed. Grimes voiced his opinion: "I wish to hell you'd get that damned thing off your shoulder. At least the little guy's doesn't talk."

But Dirks didn't care. This was going to be the hand.

**F**EATHERS looked at the cards dealt him. Two queens in the hole and one on board. He looked about. He was high. He bet and there was play all around. Then Dirks dealt the second open card. Feathers caught the fourth queen. He almost gave his hand away in delight. But his mouth closed with a snap as a small voice whispered, "Ace high full will win..."

Feathers looked at his hand once more. Four queens. No doubt of it. No full house could beat four of a kind. What did the bird mean? There was only one answer. Stay out of the hand. Feathers knew only that the bird could only tell the truth. The full house was going to win.

Feathers folded his hand.

At the sixth card only Heyden and

Dirks were left. It was just as Dirks had planned. The sixth card filled Heyden's hand, kings full. Dirks had nothing on board except a pair of deuces. And Heyden had noticed two deuces had been turned over.

They bet back and forth until Dirks said: "Look! You're broke. I don't want any more of your paper. Put something substantial up."

Dirks had right on his side. He didn't have to take the I. O. U's. Heyden bit his lip.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" Heyden asked.

"You got the club. Put that up."

Heyden figured up what he owed Dirks. Eighty thousand dollars. The hand would better two hundred thousand to the winner. "Okay."

And Dirks dealt the last card. He looked at his card. It was the blind ace. Aces full were going to win...

Heyden called and Dirks turned his cards over.

"Aces full. Beat 'em!"

"I can't," Heyden said in a strangled voice. "I've got kings full..."

Dirks was smiling still as Heyden turned his cards face up. As he said he had kings full. But the pair to go with the kings were aces. Heyden's movements were slow. The gun he brought up seemed to take a lifetime in coming to the table's edge. Then it belched flame toward Dirks and the thick-set man clutched his breast and fell crashing to the floor. Heyden's eyes went wide in amazement when they turned Dirks over. He had expected to find a bullet hole. Instead there was a small scorched area above the heart. Only Feathers had seen the invisible stranger point the rod toward Dirks as Heyden leveled the gun.

"Dirty dealer," Heyden said dispassionately.

Then it was the bird on Feathers' shoulder that spoke. And only for

Feathers' hearing alone: "Aces full won...and lost..."

Feathers understood. It was meant to turn out as it did. He got up and moved past the others, past the frightened waiter who had appeared in the door, past the startled guests in the club and outside.

"Well, baby, let's go home."

THE END

## MR. MERRIMAN'S MAD MIX-UP

★ By Lynn Standish ★

**M**R. MERRIMAN'S appearance belied his name. He was a sad lugubrious little man, whose very looks suggested nothing so much as a poor little terrier left out in the rain by his master. Mr. Merriman was an electronics technician—a very good one too—his job with International Video testified to that, but his sad dispirited personality never enabled him to rise higher than that technician's status—a fact which Mrs. Merriman, a buxom woman of forty-five years and two hundred and forty pounds—was fond of reminding him.

All events conspired against him. The day before, Mr. Clark, the chief engineer at I.V. had publicly scolded Mr. Merriman.

"John," he'd said, "you've been very slack lately. I want you to wake up. This organization has no use for dunderheads."

"Yes sir," Mr. Merriman had acknowledged the reprimand hoarsely. "I'll watch things, sir."

Then Mrs. Merriman (Mr. Merriman never thought of his wife as anything but "Mrs. Merriman") had scolded him this morning for failing to bring in certain desired purchases she had made the day before.

So this morning, Mr. Merriman sat in the control cubicle looking sadly at the four hundred co-axial cable lines, at the hundreds of relays and the thousands of switches and dangerous thoughts began to stir in his ordinarily complacent brain.

It must not be thought that Mr. Merriman suddenly revolted. No, this was a matter which had been brewing a long time, and like a diaphragm which is gradually overloaded, Mr. Merriman resisted the pressures of events up until that delicate breaking point.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when Mr. Merriman finally summoned up his courage. He thought of the hundred million video receivers in operation; he thought of the thousand different programs now pouring over the lines; and he thought of what he, Mr. Merriman, electronics technician, could do. And he did it.

He got up from his chair, took his screw driver and pliers and went to work. Flip-

"...Home..." the bird said.

And Feathers knew that in the exchange the stranger called Hermes had taken the other bird. Somehow the bird Feathers had had been given the powers to speak. Feathers was happy about it. What was the difference? They were birds of feather. And just so long as they talked...

ping switches, he changed circuit after circuit, until, in twenty minutes, every video line in the vast network of International Video, was connected with another video line—the wrong one.

Mr. Merriman then calmly put on his hat and coat, walked out of the building, drew his savings from the bank—and disappeared.

Meanwhile, all hell broke loose. All over the North American Confederation, a video riot had broken out. Students in Medic Center had been watching an appendectomy—they found themselves abruptly seeing a dog-show...

The face of the Reverend Elman vanished from the church's screen to be replaced by Sari's Sensuous Strips...

A classroom of little tykes found, to its glee, that the dissection of a corpse was an engaging affair...

Rocket Engineers, Inc. saw the test rocket vanish from the screen to be replaced by "Mrs. Gregor's Travail", a tear-jerker which affected no one...

It took the engineers of International Video more than four hours to straighten out the mess after being threatened by Communications with almost an atom bombing, not to mention a presidential order.

As for Mr. Merriman, his disappearance was never successfully solved, and Mrs. Merriman (who is now Mrs. Drayton—her second husband is not an electronics technician) does not speak of the spouse who so embarrassed her. Her last words on the matter were, "Mr. Merriman was mad—quite mad, I assure you..."

It is said that the little town of Dione, at the southern tip of Patagonia, has among its sleepy inhabitants, a new person, a man of unquestionable talents. This man, who has married one of the local belles, seems to have an extraordinary aversion to video in any form. He spends much time just relaxing or reading. And his appearance is not particularly mousy—though possibly, an interested observer might note that there seems to be an uncanny resemblance to the mad Mr. Merriman...

# READER'S PAGE

## OFF WITH A BANG

Sirs:

First off, I'd like to say that FA has really started off the year with a bang! I remarked in another letter that I thought '49 had been a good year for FA, but I think that if you continue as you've started '50 will be a much better year.

The first two issues of this year were really tops. In the January issue two stories were really outstanding: "The Usurpers", and "Revolt in Pacifico". The rest were also excellent.

But the "Dreaming Jewels" was by far the best in the February issue, and so outclassed the others as to make them nonexistent. It was really super.

FA has always been tops in the sf-fantasy field. I know your stories are supposed to be fantasy, but some of them seem very realistic—too realistic for comfort and peace of mind I might add.

I'll be looking forward eagerly to the next issue.

J. W. Peers III  
Route 2  
Adairsville, Ga.

*We're glad you liked the way 1950 has started off with FA. All we can say there is that you've not seen anything yet. Just watch the coming issues! And about the realism, we think we know what you mean. Possibly an excellent example of that would be "The Usurpers" you spoke of. Been looking more than twice at your neighbors since you read that yarn? ... Ed.*

## THE GOLDEN AGE RETURNS

Sirs:

We never expected to be writing to FA, but finally can contain ourselves no longer. The catalyst which prodded us to action is the lead novel of the February issue.

We had read the announcement of the projected "change" in AS and FA with considerable skepticism, but there was nothing fishy about Sturgeon's novel. Usually we can manage to find fault with some part of a story, but in this case there was not a wasted line. The story was right in length and every detail. It was exactly as it should have been.

There was one sentence in the novel that we especially savored: a piece of brassy, tongue-in-cheek planting that was at the same time marvelously subtle. It was in the fifth paragraph: "Horton's parents

were upstairs, but the Bluetts didn't know it." What a story!

We look back on the golden age of AS and FA and allow hope to creep into our reminiscences. Can it be that the period when Burroughs and other famous authors graced their pages will come again. It would seem so.

"Doom Ship" had nothing particularly new to its plot; we've read similar stories many times. (Now just a darn minute there, brother! I agree that it's nothing new, but I liked it. The humor that cropped up in places was good too. —Andy.)

"Mystery On Pluto" was not too well written and furthermore, the plot was not quite credible. Although we've never breathed faltronium ourselves (there is such a thing though. I just synthesized it from an eagle's viscera. —Andy.), it seems to us that it would cause more than an irritation of the lungs. And that exhaling the faltronium vapor would cause it to solidify in lumps, is even more far-fetched. "Null F" was a neat twist to an old theme, and was well written.

Best of all the shorts was Craig Brownings' "The Friendly Wolf". (No great compliment. —Andy.) We were sure that we wouldn't like it from the blurb, since the notion that the heart is the center of emotions is quite outmoded. (What about Cupid? —Andy.) But we were wrong. It was slightly terrific! (Relative to that one issue only, says I. —Andy.)

The cover... Well, considering how overworked Jones is getting (he seems to be, anyway. —Andy.), it was pretty good. Jones is the only really good cover artist you have, except Walter Hinton—where is he?—the one who did the cover for that Avar story W. Paul Ganley is always yowling about. Why not have St. John and MacCauley more often. And try and get Finlay or Lawrence for a change.

Authors we would like to see in the "new" FA and AS are more Sturgeon and Phillips, Bradbury, Kuttner, St. Reynard, Frederic Brown, and Raymond F. Jones.

Toby & Andrew Duane  
% Secretary, ISFCC  
119 Ward Rd.  
N. Tonawanda, N.Y.

*We take it this is more Toby's letter than yours, Andy. But glad you got in your own personal comments. And say, boys, speaking of "yowling" Paul Ganley, are you lads neighbors? Or maybe you're a couple of St. Reynard's "Usurpers" using one of us peaceful Earthmen's addresses. Anyway,*

*(Continued On Page 152)*

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The Carillon by Sam Merwin, Jr.  
Doctor Grimshaven's Sanitarium  
by Fletcher Pratt  
The Uncharted Isle by Clark Ashton Smith  
Thunder And Hoax by Theodore Sturgeon  
The Ultimate Catalyst by John Taine  
Perfect Citizenship by A. A. Van Vogt  
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(Continued From Page 150)

*we're glad to hear from you, and about that golden age you speak of, just watch the coming issues. They'll speak for themselves.*..... Ed.

## WANTS SOMETHING NEW

Sirs:

This is the first letter I have written you, but I have been a very avid reader of every sf book I can lay my hands on. Your January issue of FA was especially good. "The Usurpers" by Geoff St. Reynard was a story of unusual interest. And excellent job. "Sanctuary" by Charles Recour was also well-written.

But why doesn't someone come up with a really new idea to write about? Some of the themes have been written about too frequently, and others too much along similar lines.

Also, another reason for this letter, I'd like to find books by Edgar Rice Burroughs, to form a complete set. I'd appreciate any help you can give me.

Don Honey  
Box 95  
Melba, Idaho

*Glad to hear from you, Don. We're sure some of the readers of FA will be able to give you information on securing the Burroughs books. As to something new in sf. That's a pretty tall order. But we will say that in coming issues of FA and our big sister publication, AMAZING STORIES, you'll find some really top stories with "different" themes. Watch for them and see if you don't agree.*..... Ed.

## A TOP STORY

Sirs:

My first letter to FA in a long time. It was with quite a surprise that I viewed the latest, February, issue of FA. Seeing Theodore Sturgeon with the lead novel was good news. His work is excellent, the sort of high quality I like to see all the time. Most of your other lead stories fall short of the standard set by "The Dreaming Jewels". However, Rog Phillips does turn out some really fine yarns too. But as far as Sturgeon is concerned, let's see more of him.

I'd also like to put in a word of thanks for the new "story-articles" you've been presenting. They are a vast improvement over the old fact features. They're really entertaining.

Franklin M. Dietz, Jr.  
P.O. Box 696  
Kings Park, L.I., N.Y.

*You'll be seeing more top stories in FA in coming issues, we guarantee. And we're glad you like the new article series. We do too.*..... Ed.

## THE TOP ELEVEN

Sirs:

Congratulations! You have made two out

of three. That is, of the last three issues, you have had two really top ones. "Involuntary Immortals" and "The Dreaming Jewels" were both great. It would seem that FA has become a fine magazine.

The real purpose of this letter is to give you my listing of the top eleven yarns in both FA and AS that I have read. I started to make a list of ten, but somehow eleven worked in. Here they are:

THE GREEN MAN by Harold Sherman

THE GREEN MAN RETURNS — Sherman

STAR KINGS by Edmond Hamilton

ARMAGEDDON by Craig Browning

MAN FROM YESTERDAY by Lee Francis

FORGOTTEN WORLDS by Lawrence Chandler

THIS WAY TO HEAVEN by Harold Sherman

GIANTS OF MOGO by Don Wilcox

PROMETHEUS II by S. J. Byrne

HIDDEN CITY by Chester S. Geier

SO SHALL YE REAP by Rog Phillips

Those are by no means in order of preference, as I liked all equally well. I did think that the "Hidden City" issue was the best all-around issue.

If I have my pseudonyms straight, your editor Browne wrote "The Man From Yesterday". I liked that yarn very much.

And, if you please, why doesn't editor Hamling do some more writing? I loved his stories, "The Prop", and "Jimmy Takes A Trip". The endings he put on them were swell. So how about putting him to work again?

Eugene DeWeese  
Rochester, Indiana

*A fairly representative list of favorites, Eugene. As to ye eds, they've got enough to do getting you top issues of your favorite magazines!*..... Ed.

## HE'S NEVER READ BETTER

Sirs:

"The Dreaming Jewels" in the February issue was absolutely amazing! There are no words to describe my delight with this story. It is in my opinion the best story I have ever read in my past years of increased pleasure in this field of fiction.

I'd like to add also that your sister publication, AS is also at its level best. I've seen a miracle happen. There is no other way to state it. FA and AS were just in their infancy compared to now! And the illustrations inside the lead stories are something that I've always hoped for.

I don't bother reading other magazines, since yours gives me the best in everything I want. I guess that's about the highest form of praise I can hand you.

Bob Hovis  
General Delivery  
Riverbank, Cal.

*Gosh, Bob, you just leave us beaming! 'nough said.*..... Ed.

(Continued On Page 154)



# What Is Indelicacy in a Book? Or—

**WHO IS OBSCENE?** as a great defender of books in our courts asks more pungently in the title of a recent book of his.

America suffers of a vast variety of censorships—state, federal, local—

But the most insidious of all censors we have found is the average American bookdealer himself.

When we first brought to him James Joyce's *ULYSSES* he held up his hands in pious horror. A few years later, when the book was D. H. Lawrence's *LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER*, he held up his nose as well as his hands. He stocks both of them now that they have become modern classics.

The same reception was accorded our reprint of Charles-Louis Philippe's *BUBU OF MONTPARNASSE*. Even Nobel Prize Winner T. S. Eliot's introduction didn't help. For the bookdealer this great work remains nothing more than a chronicle of the lives of the men and women who make up the sidewalk traffic of Paris.

When, more recently, we came to the bookdealer with Michael Sadleir's *FORLORN SUNSET* the delicacy had become class-delicacy. This great author's previous work, *Fanny By Gaslight*—which concerned itself with the predominately vicious amusements of the rich—was allowed to be pyramided into best-sellerdom. Because *FORLORN SUNSET* shows with great care the effect of this overwhelming sensualism on the lives of the poor the censorial hands and nose went up again.

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(Continued From Page 152)

## SAY THERE, GANLEY!

Sirs:

You will note that the envelope of this letter is addressed to Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, but after thinking it over perhaps I should have said, Paul Ganley Publishing Company.

I have just finished reviewing back issues of FA and on almost every Reader's Page I found the name of Paul Ganley. Now I have nothing against the guy, but if you want to print his literature why not give him his own family column and leave the Reader's Page to us poor amateurs?

...Getting to the February issue: I thought the "Dreaming Jewels" was great. And in AS the increase to 196 pages was big news.

Jerry Copher  
4763 Cupples Pl.  
St. Louis 13, Mo.

*We feel you're kind of taking Paul to task a bit unfairly, Jerry. If Paul's got something to say in this department, he's entitled to say it. We'll print letters from everyone who writes—providing there's room, of course. Heck, we're just one big happy family, so get in there with the gang!*..... Ed.

## NOW, IT'S THIS WAY...

Sirs:

Herewith, my top ten favorites of '49:

THE EYE OF THE WORLD by Alex Blade

DINOSAUR DESTROYER by Petticoles

CITY OF SAND by Berk Livingston

THE INVOLUNTARY IMMORTALS by Rog Phillips

Tie: BEES OF DEATH by Williams, MAN WHO LAUGHED AT TIME, by Blade.

THE INSANE PLANET by Alex Blade  
ROBOT MEN OF BUBBLE CITY by Phillips

Tie: OCTOPUS OF SPACE by Blade, SWORDSMEN OF PIRA by Charles Recour

PLANET OF THE DEAD by Phillips  
THE AWAKENING by Phillips

As you have probably guessed, I like Alex Blade and Rog Phillips. I also like Lee Francis (Howard Browne or Leroy Yerxa), Livingston, St. Reynard, and Williams.

As for bringing Avar back, I'm not in favor of it, unless Browne can find another story powerful enough to merit it. TMFY was a classic. Why not let it stay that way?

Get Geoff St. Reynard to write some more stories like "Blue Bottle Fly" and "The Warder and the Wampum". In fact, get him to do anything!

Get Charles Myers to do another Toffee story!

The year 1949 has seen the rise of a new star, too. I'm speaking of Peter Worth. He has made a remarkable showing.

Get Richard Casey back.

Get Jones to do most of your covers, with an occasional Swiatek, Kohn, etc.

Get some new authors. Not that the old ones are no good, but I like variety.

Now let's get going in 1950!

Terry Carr  
134 Cambridge St.  
San Francisco 12, Cal.

*Yes, sir!*..... Ed.

## SHORT AND SWEET

Sirs:

Just a note to compliment you on the February issue of FA. The lead novel by Ted Sturgeon was the best thing you've published in almost a year. Let's hope the change is to be a steady, upgrade one.

Now all we need is more Jones for the covers.

Bill Searles  
827 Nathan Hale Rd.  
West Palm Beach, Fla.

*Thanks for the good word, Bill. And you'll be seeing some terrific Jones covers this year. Watch for them.*..... Ed.

## HE KEEPS TRYING

Sirs:

I don't know why I keep on writing letters to you. This is, I believe, my fifth letter to your department and as yet there has been no acknowledgment from your end. However, after reading Paul Ganley's letter in the February issue, I am encouraged to keep after my campaign against covers that have nothing to do with the story they are supposed to illustrate.

This makes two things that Ganley and I agree on. The other being that Geoff St. Reynard is a fine author. (I've read his two novels published by Rinehart under his real name of Robert W. Krepps, "The Field of Night", and "The Courts of the Lion" and they are excellent works.)

Paul Ganley is wrong in his notion, of course, that the stories are written about a preconceived painting. It strikes me that the artist just takes a look at the title and then paints a picture without reading the story. That certainly seems to be the case after trying to reconcile the last two covers...

Nevertheless I shall continue to read FA as I have ever since it was first published. Keep on giving us good stories by writers like St. Reynard.

William E. Davies  
6901 Marlow Ave.  
Bel Gardens, Cal.

*This business about the covers and the*

cover story is somewhat involved, Bill. First of all, it is true that sometimes the artist paints the cover first and the writer does his story from the painting—just as it happens the other way around. As to why it seems that the cover does not always fit an exact scene depicted in the story, that is a problem loaded with technicalities. It is almost too much to include every detail of a given scene in a cover and still give it dramatic impact and simple clarity. Thus, very often, an attempt is made to "symbolize" the story by the cover scene depicted. In all ways we try to strike a happy medium. ...As to St. Reynard, you'll be seeing more of him in future issues..... Ed.

# AN OLD TIME FAN

Sirs:

I am an old time reader of both of your publications, FA and AS. I started reading AS back in 1928, and FA in 1940. I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you that you have two swell magazines.

Along these lines, thanks for the February issue, and "The Dreaming Jewels". It was a honey of a story. All I can say is, keep up the good work and make an old-time fan happier still.

Vernon L. McCain  
% Western Union  
Ellensburg, Wash.

Glad to hear from you, Vernon, and let us know what you think of recent issues..... Ed.

Carl Landis  
East Liverpool, Ohio

That's our job, Carl, and we intend to keep doing it!..... Ed.

# BACK TO THE FOLD

Sirs:

Along with a good many other fans I deserted your magazines back in 1945, but recently, because of the rumors going around about your "new" policy and the authors you were publishing, I decided to sample the book again.

To say I was pleasantly surprised is an understatement. The lead novel in the February issue, "The Dreaming Jewels", is as close to being a classic as a story can get. It rates with the finest material being published in the field today.

If you follow up this story with others like it, you have won back an old reader. And let's hope the change for the better extends to AS too...



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## OVERJOYED, HE SAYS

Sirs:

I was frankly overjoyed to see Theodore Sturgeon's magnificent novel, "The Dreaming Jewels" in the February issue of FA. Not only because Sturgeon is such a fine writer; not only because it was a swell story; but largely due to the fact that Sturgeon is the first outsider to appear on the cover of FA in a long time. Writers like Browning, Blade, Phillips, Livingston, and Francis are fine, but overdoing anything can lose its value. More new writers on the cover.

"Null F" was a fine story, but Worth kids around too much. I think that if he stops clowning he'll make a name for himself. I still have a vivid memory of "Window To The Future".

By the way, there's something I'd like to comment on. A quote from "Null F": "...a man appeared ahead walking toward him. He was wearing loose shorts and a

long sleeved, double-breasted sports jacket. Both of bright orange."

Then, a little later: "He could have been strolling along a park of 1949 without attracting attention in any way."

Well, I prefer my ochre jacket, as it blends so nicely with my mauve shorts. Every man to his own taste, however...

Morton D. Paley  
1455 Townsend Ave.  
New York 52, N.Y.

*Heck, Mort, you oughta see us in our polka dot slacks and turquoise beret. That's really something! ... But seriously, Pete apologized for the slip... Which about winds up the department for this month. We'd like to ask that you get your letters in as soon as possible after reading the issue. Makes it easier to include them. Some just have to slip by because of deadlines. So get the pen out and let's hear from you..... Ed.*

★ ★ ★

## AND THE RAINS CAME...

★

By Dan Corliss

★

**I**T WAS a beautiful night in New York. The day had been hot and now the cool of evening seemed all the more pleasant by contrast. Keenan had only about eighteen guests for dinner, and it had been an altogether convivial session. The food was perfect, the wines extraordinary, and now coffee and cigars in the garden of Keenan's luxurious penthouse made living seem really worth while.

I remember Stoner saying casually as he toyed with the stem of his brandy balloon: "Wonder how many are leaving town for good." He gestured with a finger at the line of lights we could see moving over the George Washington bridge.

"The war scare isn't that bad, is it?" Frenton, a colleague of Keenan's at the University asked.

I replied: "I'm afraid it is. The newspapers have been having a field day such as we haven't seen since the last crisis back in the sixties. A lot of people think war is coming."

A chorus of voices agreed with me. But then another broke in. It was that of a little known physicist, Brandon, who challenged the common belief.

He was a tall, middle-aged man, with an air of tolerance as if he'd been listening to children talk. He smiled.

"I think I can speak now," he said with strange finality. "There isn't going to be any war—ever."

No one laughed, but several smiled.

"What makes you so sure?" I asked.

"It's simple," he replied urbanely, "it's very simple. You see, it rains in the world; it rains often and there are strong winds."

The answer seemed stupid and assinine. Several people tittered.

Unperturbed, Brandon elaborated. "I'm with the State Department," he said, "in addition to being a physicist. There is no security violation coming, rest assured. It's merely a matter which the International Council has made clear. If there was to be an atomic war, very little would survive on this Earth—and no man at all. You see, war means the atmosphere would be contaminated with radioactive products, materials of dust which float and hover about the air, borne everywhere. No place is secure or immune. In the quantities which a war would introduce into the air, the radioactives would destroy the world. It's just that easy. Fortunately, everyone knows that now. No one dares to attempt an atomic war. You see—" here he smiled—"even the war-makers don't want to die."

No one said anything. We were quiet for a moment.

"It's true," Brandon insisted, "the pollution by rain and wind would wipe out all life—we just can't have a war—and we won't. I don't know how things will be settled, but no man dares use atomics."

I remember sitting there. I took a sip of my brandy. The peculiar feeling of comfort which his words brought, didn't completely allay the other feeling that the description conveyed. I thought, and the rains came...

# FABLES FROM THE FUTURE

★ By Lee Owens ★

"DAMN!" BILL Raymond, the co-officer of the New Delhi-Chicago rocket shuffled through the sheaf of weather reports. "We're putting down in a rotten soup of the Chiport," he said to Pilot-officer Jack Nelson.

Nelson lifted his head from the instrument he was studying and touched a stud ever so slightly. The tone of the roaring rockets rose a bit higher.

He shrugged his handsome shoulders.

"Don't worry, Bill," he said. "I can land this thing in anything—and you know it."

"Not if you don't have a good talker on the radar," Bill answered. "Remember the bad time we had at Chungport?"

Soon the Delhi rocket was over the Chiport at ninety thousand feet and Jack cut in the radar and communication system. His own infra-red and radar were still too coarse to land a fully loaded rocket on such a small area. He waited for the contact.

Over the buzz of background noise and static, a voice crackled out of the loudspeaker.

"Rocket Z-112! Attention."

"Right," Jack answered. "In contact!"

"We've picked you up on a one centimeter beam. Follow instructions, implicitly and we'll talk you in."

"I've landed blind before," Jack countered acidly. "This is Pilot-Officer Nelson. Just bring us in and save your commentary!"

Coolly the voice came back: "Confine your comments to acknowledgement of instructions or I will have to discipline you."

"How do you like that?" Jack exploded to Bill. "There must be some smart aleck down there who's looking for trouble. Wait till we land."

Crisply and authoritatively came operating instructions. The radar landing guide was good. Jack obeyed every order perfectly and slowly through the dense fog and smog, the huge Delhi rocket began settling earthward, guided toward the ground like some blind, monstrous worm. Jack's fingers played with his console like those of a skilled organist, and the rocket, despite her slow speed obeyed with alacrity.

Beads of sweat stood out on Jack's forehead as the orders crisped from the loudspeaker... "...even jet three—touch acceleration—lock left gyro—hold it!—cut

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your auto-pilot for four seconds—now!—disconnect—feed number two jet—that's it—hold it..." The technical jargon changed from words to acts as Jack's skilled hands translated them into motions.

The strain was terrific and both Jack and Bill sat in tense concentration till the sweet welcome thump of metal against dock told them they had brought her in. Jack cut the switches and the roar of motors died. He leaned back and fumbled for a cigarette, a long sigh of relief escaping him.

"Fair landing," the communicator announced suddenly. "You used too much power. Suggest you take another instrument course as soon as possible. That is all." The communicator went silent.

Jack straightened up angrily. "Who the hell do you think you are?" He demanded of the dead loudspeaker. "I've had more experience—" He broke off angrily and turned to Bill. "Check through customs. I'm going to see this character in Instruments."

The pilot-officer strode angrily through the crowds of passengers, the agents and mechanics, toward the operations offices. He paused before a door and read the name. "Instruments Section—No Admittance Except To Authorized Personnel," it said.

He flung open the door.

The room he entered was a fantastic maze of radio, radar and TV gear. Several people were seated at desks before screens. He stepped up to an attractive red-head who was just lighting a cigarette.

"Where's Blind Instruments?" he asked peremptorily. "The one who just talked me in—I'm Delhi rocket Z-112."

"Well, well," the girl smiled, "so you're the one." She shook her head, "that was poor, Pilot-Officer. You really didn't do such a bad job—but it could stand a good deal of improvement."

"You're Blind Instruments?" Jack asked, startled.

"I am," the girl answered. "Joanne Claim. Listen," she said abruptly, "I haven't the time to talk now. You may ask me to dinner. Eight tonight. Is it a date? Right." She rattled off her address.

Jack through back his head and laughed. "I came in here to raise hell with you—and now I'm taking you out. It's a date. I'll pick you up at eight—and tonight I'll do the talking!"

"Well," Bill asked, "how did you make out. Give him a chewing out?"

"He's a girl," Jack answered with a grin, "and I'm going out with her tonight. I'll show her who's master in the dark!"

★ ★ ★

THE DOPESTERS

BERRY CARLING eased his bulk down on the soft air-form of the couch, and breathed a sigh of relief. He picked up his

drink from the low service table and looked across at the lovely girl seated in the opposite chair.

"This is the life, honey," he said, smiling. "From now on we'll be flying high. I talked with Reactions, Inc. and they're giving me a hundred thousand credits. You know what that means? It means we're going to get that place in the Rockies—and no more rocket races for us." He sighed again, contentedly.

"Berry," Lorraine said, sipping her own drink, "if you only knew how I waited for this time." Tears came to her eyes.

The husky rocketeer got up and put his arm around his wife.

"It's been an eight year grind, baby, but we've got enough credits now to last us. We can live like we want to. Believe me, Lorraine, the only rocketing we'll ever do is on Interplanetary's liners—no more races."

The video interrupted them. "Two gentlemen to see you, Captain Carling."

"Send them up," Berry said curtly. "Damn," he turned to his wife, "what the devil do they want now. The races have two days yet. We're supposed to relax. Do they think a Lunar race is a joke? I'll really be fagged when it's done."

"Maybe another advertiser, Berry. Tell them we don't want any. We've got enough credits now to choke a spaceman."

There was a knock and Berry opened the door. Two well dressed men stepped in. The tall one said: "Captain Carling?"

"Yes," Berry nodded cordially.

Lorraine had gone into the other room.

"We'll come to the point," the tall man said. His hands were in his pockets. "Would you like to make a million credits, Captain? We know this is your last race—according to the 'casters. We're prepared to give you a draft on National One or cash, whichever you prefer."

Berry looked at the man in amazement. His face turned red. His voice was soft when he spoke, but the anger strained through.

"You want to dope the fuel, eh?"

"If you like to call it that, Captain. We prefer to say we'd like to assist you. Our chemists have done an excellent job." The man was all suavity, all coolness, as if he was discussing a straight business proposition rather than a rocket race fix.

"Get out," Berry said in a low controlled voice, "get out!"

"I'm sorry, Captain," the tall man said thoughtfully, "but I'm afraid this is one race you won't win!" He turned on his heel and he and his companion were gone.

Lorraine dashed from the next room. "Darling," she said excitedly, "get the police!" But Berry was already on the video...

Berry crouched in his speedster, hardly able to wriggle, his body a mass of tapped

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and padded flesh, insulated against the extravagant accelerations he was undergoing. The first lap was done and on his plotter he could see that number eight was still holding his substantial lead, trailed by himself. That was the poor sucker who had fallen for the syndicate's offer. Berry was playing his usual race, but all his little stratagems weren't working. This youngster—Berry looked at the chart and saw it was some newcomer named "Eltone"—was holding a flat fifty thousand kilometer lead. No matter what Berry did, the boy kept ahead easily. It was strictly a two-man race now. Every now and then Berry flipped on his radio and heard the excited voices of the telecasters describing the event.

Skillfully adjusting his meters, Berry tried to squeeze out more speed. But it was no use. Berry reflected on the nastiness of modern living. The authorities couldn't get anywhere with the syndicate. It was too powerful. The police had tried it seemed but without success. Evidently this youngster ahead of him, hadn't any qualms about accepting the "dope." Rocket racing was becoming strictly a racket and Berry was glad this was the last one for him.

"...something's up," the caster's voice boomed, "number eight looks funny. Here at station four we can see his exhaust clearly. It's bright yellow. It looks like... oh my God!—no!—folks, He's going to..."

Berry threw on his own video for a close-up—just in time to see the number eight speedster tremble, hang peculiarly in the video's eye, and then erupt into a searing, tearing flame, a blossom of reddish glare which vaporized the unfortunate one, like a match-head...

Berry knew he'd win this race now that the fake competition was gone, but his face was white as he thought of the foolish kid, thinking to make a fast credit by riding a fuel-enricher, instead turning into a vaporized puff of carbonized flesh. Thank God, he thought grimly, thank God, I'm getting out of it...

★ ★ ★

### THE WITCH OF ADONAI

CAPTAIN John Fleming, Terra Space, '93, pulled himself closer to the bar. He shoved his glass out.

"Give me another—no, make it *flan* instead. This stuff is poison."

"Catchin' on, eh?" the bartender grinned. "Drink enough of them *sauces* an you'll get battier than a witch." He poured Fleming a slug of flan.

The bar was crowded, mostly with rugged miners and survey men who were doing the layout work for the new port. This part of the city of Adonai was really an excrescence on the greater bulk of old Adonai. Since the discovery of uranium



on Tethys, the Saturnian Moon was being swamped in big projects.

Fleming's brows knitted. He tapped the bartender on the arm as he started to move away.

"Say, what the devil do they mean by 'witch' around here? Everybody keeps dropping remarks. I'm new. I don't get the pitch."

The bartender laughed.

"It's just a sayin'," he said agreeably. "Of course there's lots a talk about telepaths and teleports, but nobody ever sees one. They always say 'my brother' or 'my uncle'—somebody else always sees 'em. I heard talk, but I ain't seen none myself."

Fleming turned away musing about the idiosyncrasies of humans, who always looked for the mysterious in the commonplace.

His eyes fell on a strange tableau. A gnome-like man, little, wizened and old, was sitting at a crowded table. Suddenly by his side, a burly miner stood up, swung his arm around and brought a burly haymaker against the man's cheek.

The little man fell like a pole-axed ox. He lay still for about three seconds, it seemed. Fleming half-rose in his seat to challenge the bruiser, but just then the little man arose a bit unsteadily to his feet. The room was quiet.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said shakily, his face white with anger.

"I don't like your remarks," the other said viciously.

Calmly the little man reached in his pocket and brought out a little—Fleming couldn't quite make it out. There was a flare of brilliant light, a cloud of smoke, and a thunderous roar. In a crazy distorted way, the room shivered briefly, and Fleming thought he caught a glimpse of the little man in the doorway.

The burly miner lay on the floor. One glance and Fleming knew he was dead.

The room became an uproar then and Fleming decided to leave before the Agents came. As he walked out the door unmolested by the milling crowd trying to get a look at the dead miner, his foot kicked something. He bent down and picked up the object. It was a simple wooden box about four inches cube. It was open on one end. Fleming looked in. There was absolutely nothing there—yet it was the box that the man had withdrawn from his pocket. Faintly, fading rapidly and barely visible to the eye was Adonai..." it said...

★ ★ ★

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"Watch this, gentlemen," he said imperiously, "the girl's clothes are absolutely waterproof!" Half-bored the reporters watched this demonstration of the new fabric test-tube stuff—that was to revolutionize all fabrics. But they were used to Granger's extravagances. He was always announcing something revolutionary—which usually turned out to be quite different, and that's all.

The assistant picked up a hose and calmly began to spray the model with the stream of water which he released. Lila Grayson, blase society reporter for the WSSK Video, even looked surprised.

"Zee-Zee," she admitted, "You've actually done it!" For in spite of the stream of water playing against her clothes, Clarice remained perfectly dry except for her legs, down which the dripping water ran.

The soiree broke up shortly afterwards, with everyone commenting on the beauty of the clothes which withstood the water so well. "No one will ever wear anything but "Syn-Lon" from now on," Granger said pompously.

Clarice wandered delicately through the studio doors to the sun-porch. It was raining heavily. This would provide the final test.

As Clarice stepped outside, nothing happened for a moment. As models do everywhere, Clarice struck a statuesque pose, allowing the rain to play against her face and neck. She was the Goddess of the storm and Zee-Zee was her priest.

And then before the astonished eyes of all—but particularly Zee-Zee—Clarice abruptly appeared as naked as the day she was born. It didn't happen at once. Her suit and flimsy underthings melted from her, so to speak, running down and mingling with the water.

For a moment she didn't realize what was happening. She glanced down then and saw! Simultaneously the crowd of reporters burst into laughter and Clarice saw Zee-Zee tearing at his hair. With a gasp at the realization of her nudity, she fled from the porch through the studio into the dressing room, her face, and other fascinating portions of her anatomy, a bright red.

Belton, of the Boston Video clapped Granger on the shoulder.

"Don't worry Zee-Zee," he shouted over the tumultuous laughter, "just remember rainwater always has a little acid in it! Some chemist, you!"

Sadly Zee-Zee surveyed the rapidly running puddle that had been Clarice's clothes. "Oh!" was all he said.

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